

Adapting Aging Societies

A Comparative Study between Japan and China

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Abstract

Population aging has emerged as one of the most critical demographic and social issues in East Asia. As two major nations confronting the challenges of rapid population aging and persistently low fertility rates, China and Japan offer valuable cases for comparative analysis. To assess the applicability of Japan's experience in tackling population aging to the Chinese context, this paper explores the implications of Japan's experience for China's population governance by comparing changes in demographic structure, the mechanisms driving low fertility, policy responses, and their respective outcomes.

Employing a comparative research methodology, this study analyzes statistical data, policy reports, and academic literature from the World Bank, the OECD, the United Nations, China's National Bureau of Statistics, and relevant Japanese government agencies. The findings reveal substantial similarities between China and Japan in the mechanisms driving population aging; in both countries, demographic change is shaped by declining fertility rates, rising life expectancy, increasing child-rearing costs, work-family conflict, traditional gender roles, and shifting social values. However, significant differences in population size, regional development disparities, economic structures, and governance conditions mean that Japan's policy experience cannot be directly transplanted to China.

The study further indicates that while Japan has achieved some success in mitigating the economic and social pressures of aging through measures such as increasing labor force participation among women and older people, refining long-term care insurance systems, developing community-based elderly care services, and promoting lifelong learning, it has failed to reverse the trend of low fertility fundamentally. This suggests that population aging is

primarily a structural outcome of the modernization process rather than an issue that can be resolved solely through pro-natalist policies.

Based on this analysis, the paper argues that China's future population policy should gradually shift from attempting to "reverse aging" to "adapting to aging." The focus should be on mitigating the adverse effects of changes in demographic change by maintaining economic productivity, improving social security and elderly care systems, promoting active aging, and building a fertility-friendly society. Japan's experience should be viewed as a valuable reference rather than a policy template to be replicated directly.

Keywords: Population aging; low fertility; China; Japan; demographic transition; social policy

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1 Research Background and Purpose	5
1.2 Literature Review	6
1.3 Methodology	8
1.4 Theoretical Framework	10
2. China: Demographic Structure and Structural Causes	14
2.1 Demographic Trends in China	14
2.2 Structural Causes of Low Fertility	16
2.3 Socioeconomic Implications in China	18
3. Japan: Demographic Evolution and Policy Response	22
3.1 Demographic Trends in Japan	22
3.2 Structural Causes of Low Fertility	24
3.3 Policy Responses to Population Aging	25
3.4 Evaluation of Policy Effectiveness	27
4. Comparative Analysis	31
4.1 Similarities in Demographic Mechanisms	31
4.2 Key Structural Differences	32
4.3 Explaining Differences in Policy Outcomes	34
5. Policy Implications for China	37
5.1 From Reversing to Adapting	37
5.2 Maintaining Economic Productivity with an Aging Population	38
5.3 Improving Social Security and Elderly Care Systems	40
5.3.1 Improving Elderly Care Services and Medical Security Systems	40
5.3.2 Promoting Active Aging and Community Participation	41
5.3.3 Promoting Equity-Oriented Reform of the Pension System	42
5.4 Building a Fertility-Friendly Environment	43
5.5 Limitations and Implementation Conditions	44
6. Conclusion	47
References	50

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Purpose

Population aging has become a widespread demographic trend in many parts of the world (UNDESA, 2024). Although its pace and severity vary across countries, the issue has attracted public attention, particularly in developed countries already affected by it (World Health Organization, 2025). Meanwhile, population aging and low fertility rates often occur concurrently and reinforce one another. Together, these trends constitute a long-term structural issue with wide-ranging and often adverse social consequences.

East Asia is one of the regions most severely affected by population aging (UNESCAP, n.d.). The region has one of the fastest rates of population aging and one of the lowest fertility rates in the world (UNESCAP, n.d.). East Asia can therefore be regarded as being at the forefront of the aging crisis, as the severity of the issue is rarely matched in other regions worldwide (UNESCAP, n.d.).

As two East Asian countries, Japan and China constitute valuable cases for comparison. Japan was the first country to enter an aging society and remains one of the most aged societies in the world (Government of Japan, 2024). By contrast, China entered an aging society more recently and at a much faster pace, driven by both natural demographic evolution and the effects of population policy (World Bank, 2024b). Although the two countries differ in their structural backgrounds and adopted policies, they share similar economic and cultural paths toward an aging society (Yasuda & Iwai, 2011), and comparing these cases may provide valuable insights into the issue.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the applicability of Japan's experience in addressing population aging to the Chinese context. Specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following research question:

How applicable is Japan's experience in addressing population aging to the Chinese context?

To answer this question, the study compares demographic trends, structural causes of low fertility, policy responses, and policy outcomes in China and Japan. Based on this comparative analysis, the paper evaluates the extent to which Japan's experience offers useful policy implications for China, while accounting for differences in demographic structure, economic development, and social conditions between the two countries.

1.2 Literature Review

Population aging has become a significant research topic in the fields of demography, economics, and public policy. Existing studies generally agree that population aging is closely linked to declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy, both of which are common outcomes of modernization.

Regarding the mechanisms driving population aging, the Demographic Transition Theory proposed by Bongaarts (2009) has been highly influential. This theory posits that improvements in medical conditions, public health, and living standards lead to a significant drop in mortality rates—particularly among infants and young children—thereby reducing the societal demand for large families. Simultaneously, the expansion of education, urbanization, and economic development has raised the cost of child-rearing, further contributing to the decline in fertility

rates. As the number of newborns decreases while the elderly population continues to grow, the age structure of society gradually shifts toward an aging profile.

Beyond the mechanisms behind aging, scholars have also focused extensively on its economic and social consequences. The OECD (2022; 2024) notes that population aging and low fertility rates lead to a shrinking working-age population, thereby undermining economic growth potential and straining pension and healthcare systems. As dependency ratios rise, expenditures on pensions and healthcare increase, while a shrinking labor force constrains fiscal revenue growth. Similarly, the World Bank (2015) identifies population aging as a long-term structural challenge for East Asia, with profound implications for labor markets, economic growth, and fiscal sustainability.

Research on low fertility rates in East Asia emphasizes the importance of cultural and social factors. Yasuda and Iwai (2011) point out that in East Asian societies such as China and Japan, children have traditionally borne responsibility for caring for older family members; consequently, changes in family structure are closely linked to population aging. At the same time, accelerated urbanization, rising educational attainment, and shifting social values have transformed marriage and childbearing from inevitable life stages into matters of personal choice, contributing to growing trends toward delayed marriage, delayed childbearing, and smaller families.

In recent years, Japan—as one of the first nations globally to enter an aging society—has become a key case study in this area of research. Studies by the OECD (2024) and the World Bank (2015) indicate that Japan has successfully mitigated some of the adverse effects of population aging by increasing labor force participation among women and older adults,

promoting lifelong learning, establishing a long-term care insurance system, and implementing policies to support child-rearing. However, existing studies also generally indicate that, although Japan's policies have enhanced societal resilience to aging, they have fundamentally failed to reverse the long-term trend of low fertility. This suggests that population aging is not merely a policy issue but is also shaped by deep-seated economic structures, sociocultural factors, and evolving family values.

Overall, the existing literature has extensively examined the mechanisms driving population aging, its social impacts, and Japan's policy experience. However, compared with studies focusing on either China or Japan in isolation, research that systematically compares the two nations and explores the applicability of Japan's experience to China remains relatively limited. Therefore, this paper compares China and Japan by analyzing demographic trends, the mechanisms underlying low fertility, policy responses, and policy outcomes to examine the implications of Japan's experience for population governance in China.

1.3 Methodology

This paper employs a comparative research approach to analyze the characteristics, causes, and policy responses associated with population aging in China and Japan. These two countries were selected for comparison because both are in East Asia and face severe structural demographic challenges stemming from population aging and low fertility rates. At the same time, they exhibit significant differences in population size, historical background, economic structure, and stages of policy development. Japan was one of the first countries globally to enter an aging society and has accumulated decades of policy experience. In contrast, China is currently undergoing a rapid demographic transition and faces many challenges similar to those

Japan has encountered. Consequently, comparing China and Japan facilitates an understanding of both the common mechanisms underlying population aging and the structural constraints specific to each country.

This paper relies entirely on secondary sources for its analysis and does not involve collecting primary data; no surveys, interviews, or fieldwork were conducted during the research process. The study is primarily based on publicly available demographic statistics, government reports, and academic literature. Key data sources include publications and reports from the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations, the National Bureau of Statistics of China, and relevant Japanese government agencies. Additionally, the paper draws on academic papers and policy reports to analyze the mechanisms driving low fertility rates, structural demographic changes, and policy outcomes.

The comparative analysis in this paper focuses on four key areas. First, it compares demographic trends in China and Japan, including fertility rates, aging, dependency ratios, life expectancy, and changes in population structure. Second, it compares the structural mechanisms underlying low fertility rates in both countries, such as economic pressures, work-family conflicts, traditional gender roles, and shifting social values. Third, it analyzes the policy measures adopted by the Japanese government to address population aging and population decline. Fourth, it evaluates the effectiveness and limitations of these policies and discusses the applicability of Japan's experience to the Chinese context.

This paper also has certain limitations. Because the research relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data, its conclusions are constrained by the quality and availability of existing information. Furthermore, the study focuses primarily on macro-level changes in

demographic structure, the economy, and policy rather than on individual experiences or personal attitudes. Therefore, this paper does not provide primary evidence from citizens, families, or policymakers; instead, it should be understood as a macro-level comparative study of demographic trends and policy responses.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study primarily employs Bongaarts' Demographic Transition Theory and a demographic structure analysis framework to explain the mechanisms behind population aging, the reasons for persistently low fertility rates, and the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of population policies.

According to demographic transition theory, changes in demographic structure typically accompany socioeconomic modernization. The early stages of demographic transition are generally marked first by a decline in mortality rates. As medical conditions, public health, nutrition, and quality of life improve, infant and overall mortality rates gradually fall, while average life expectancy rises (Bongaarts, 2009). During this phase, the population may experience a temporary period of rapid growth because fertility rates do not decline at the same pace. However, as industrialization, urbanization, educational expansion, and economic development progress, fertility rates eventually decrease. Urban living raises the economic costs of housing, education, and child-rearing, while longer periods of education and competition in the labor market delay marriage and childbearing. Ultimately, the combined decline in mortality and fertility alters the age structure of the population: increased longevity expands the elderly population. At the same time, fewer births reduce the young population, causing the proportion of older people within the total population to rise steadily.

Thus, population aging is not merely the result of increased longevity or declining birth rates but a structural shift driven by the interaction of both factors. Low fertility reduces the number of young people entering society, while high life expectancy results in more people entering—and remaining in—old age for longer periods. As this process unfolds, the “demographic dividend” previously generated by a large working-age population gradually dissipates, and society begins to face challenges such as a shrinking workforce, a rising dependency ratio, increased pension expenditures, and growing demand for healthcare and long-term care (World Bank, 2015; OECD, 2022).

Similarly, the persistence of low fertility cannot be explained solely by population policies. Although government policies that restrict or encourage childbirth can influence family choices to some extent, decisions regarding marriage and childbearing in modern society are also shaped by broader economic, institutional, and cultural factors. Urbanization and educational competition have driven up the costs of housing, education, healthcare, and childcare; rising levels of female education and expanded employment opportunities have increased the career-related opportunity costs of childbearing; and excessive working hours, combined with work-family conflict, make it difficult for young people to balance employment with parenting responsibilities. Furthermore, traditional gender divisions of labor within the family place a disproportionate burden of housework and childcare on women (McDonald, 2013; Boydell et al., 2023). At the same time, increasing emphasis is placed on individual autonomy, self-actualization, and lifestyle choices, meaning that marriage and childbearing are no longer universally viewed as essential life stages. Collectively, these factors suggest that low fertility rates may persist long after restrictive population policies have ended.

Within this theoretical framework, population aging should be understood as a long-term structural outcome of modernization rather than simply the result of the success or failure of a single policy. While China's one-child policy certainly accelerated the decline in fertility, both China and Japan face shared challenges—such as high childcare costs, work-family conflict, gendered divisions of labor, and shifting values regarding marriage and childbearing. This implies that, despite their differing policy histories, both nations are subject to similar demographic dynamics driven by economic development and social transformation.

This framework also establishes the criteria used in this paper to evaluate population policies. The success of such policies cannot be measured solely by whether they raise the total fertility rate or restore population growth. Given the long-term nature of demographic shifts, even a short-term rise in fertility takes years to translate into an expanded workforce. Therefore, policies should also be evaluated based on their ability to mitigate the economic impact of a shrinking workforce, sustain social security systems, meet the medical and long-term care needs of the elderly, improve the quality of life for older adults, and enhance societal resilience in the face of demographic change. In other words, a policy can still be considered effective if it successfully alleviates the economic and social consequences of aging, even if it fails to reverse the trend itself.

Based on this theoretical framework and research methodology, the subsequent chapters first analyze the pace of population aging in China, the structural causes of low fertility, and the associated socioeconomic consequences, and then examine the policies adopted by Japan—which encountered similar issues at an earlier stage—and their effectiveness. By establishing an analytical foundation for both countries, this study further assesses which shared

conditions make the Japanese experience a valuable reference and which structural differences limit its direct applicability to the Chinese context.

2. China: Demographic Structure and Structural Causes

2.1 Demographic Trends in China

China has one of the fastest rates of population aging in the world, as reflected in the rapid increase in the proportion of people aged 65 and above. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2023), this share reached 14.9% in 2022, marking China's entry into a “deep aging society,” with an elderly population of 210 million—the largest in any single country.

In addition, China's total fertility rate (TFR) has declined dramatically from above-replacement levels in the 1970s to extremely low levels. According to data from the World Bank (2024c) as presented in Figure 1, China's TFR fell from around 5.8 in 1970 to approximately 1 in 2024, well below the replacement level of 2.1 and even lower than that of its neighboring country, Japan, which had a TFR of 1.1 in 2024. This places China among the countries with the lowest fertility rates globally.

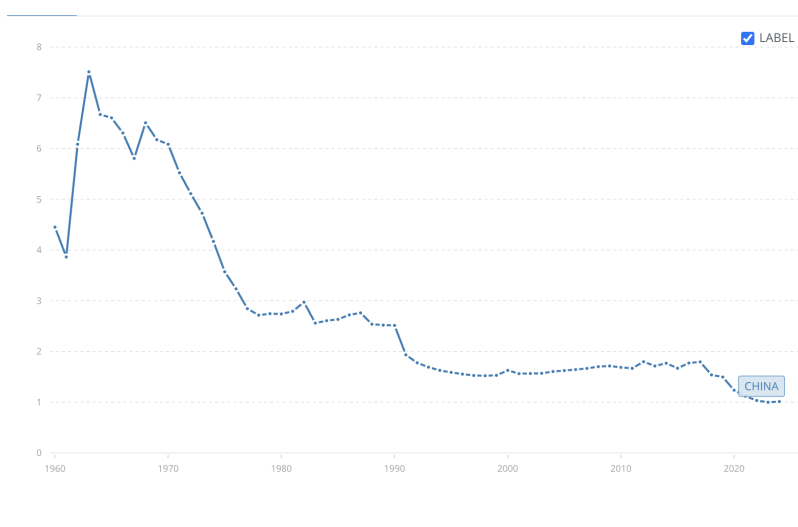


Figure 1, Fertility Rate in China, 1960–2024

Meanwhile, China is also experiencing changes in both its dependency ratio and population pyramid. According to World Bank (2024a) data on dependency ratios, China's dependency ratio has risen steadily since 2010, indicating a growing burden on the working population and a shrinking working-age population. This trend is also reflected in China's population pyramid. Figures 2, 3, and 4 illustrate changes in China's population age structure in 2000, 2010, and 2020. First, the base of the population pyramid is narrowing significantly. In 2000, the 10–14 age group accounted for the largest share of the population; by 2010, its share had begun to decline; and by 2020, the proportion of young people in the pyramid had shrunk further. This indicates a continued decline in China's birth rate. Second, the center of the population distribution is gradually shifting toward middle-aged and older groups. By 2020, the population peak had shifted to the 30–34 age group, signaling a long-term demographic imbalance. Overall, China's population pyramid is gradually shifting from a traditional pyramid shape to a spindle shape, reflecting rapid population aging and declining fertility rates.

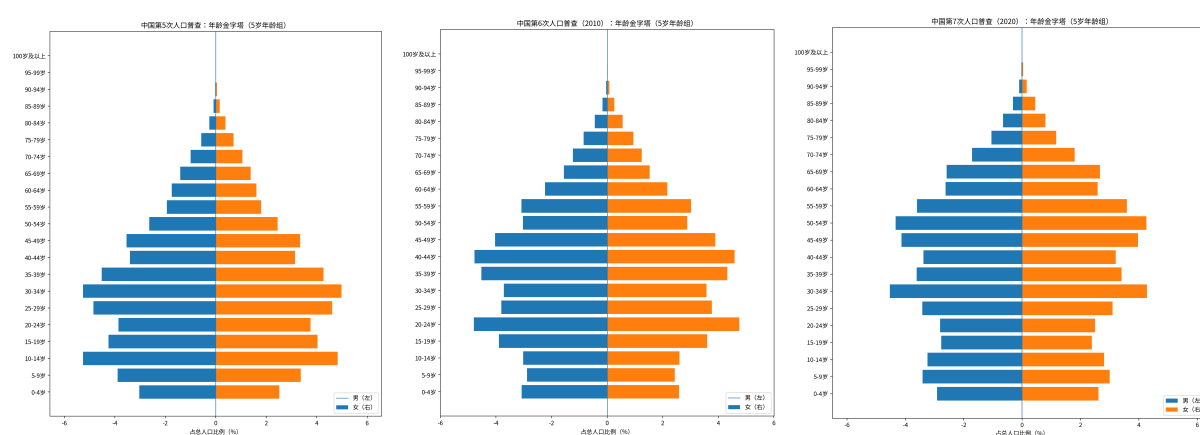


Figure 2, 3, 4. Population pyramids of China in 2000, 2010, and 2020 (5-year age groups). Figure created by the author using data from the Fifth (2000), Sixth (2010), and Seventh (2020) National Population Censuses.

2.2 Structural Causes of Low Fertility

China's current low fertility rate is the result of the interplay between historical population policies and modern socio-economic changes. While the one-child policy was a significant historical factor in China's demographic transition, it cannot fully explain the country's persistently declining fertility rates today. Driven by urbanization, the expansion of education, labor market competition, and shifting family values, fertility behavior in China is increasingly shaped by structural factors similar to those found in other modernized societies.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, China's rapid population growth strained the country's relatively limited economic resources and public service capacity. To curb this growth, the government implemented the one-child policy in 1979, limiting family size through local administrative controls, economic penalties, and public awareness campaigns (Greenhalgh, 2008). This policy significantly accelerated the decline in fertility rates; according to World Bank data, China's total fertility rate dropped from approximately 5.7 in 1970 to below replacement level by the early 1990s (World Bank, 2024c). Thus, while the one-child policy played a pivotal role in China's demographic transition, its economic and social impacts were complex; it should not be simplistically dismissed as a “necessary cost” of economic development, nor can one assert that China would have failed to achieve economic growth in its absence.

Crucially, even after the one-child policy was gradually relaxed and eventually abolished in 2015, fertility rates failed to rebound; instead, the number of births continued to decline. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China show that the annual number of births fell from 17.86 million in 2016 to approximately 9 million in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024). This trend indicates that China's current low fertility rate can no longer be attributed

primarily to direct government restrictions on family size. Although the one-child policy may have accelerated the trend toward smaller families and altered fertility norms to some extent, the persistence of low fertility reflects bigger structural changes within the economy and society.

In modern China, the costs of housing, education, healthcare, and childcare have become critical factors influencing decisions regarding marriage and childbearing. Intense job market competition and income uncertainty have led young people to delay marriage and childbirth; rising levels of female education and labor force participation have heightened the conflict between childbearing and career advancement; and traditional gender roles continue to place a disproportionate burden of childcare and housework on women. At the same time, the importance of personal development, career achievement, and lifestyle choices has steadily risen, and marriage and childbearing have gradually shifted from universal life obligations to matters of personal choice (Luo et al., 2025). These changes bear striking similarities to the mechanisms underlying low fertility in other East Asian societies, such as Japan.

Financial factors further contribute to the declining fertility rate. As noted by the World Bank (2024b), rising child-rearing costs, including education, housing, and healthcare, are widely recognized as major barriers to childbearing in China. Relative to income, child-rearing costs in China rank among the highest globally. Moreover, employment pressure increases economic uncertainty, delaying marriage and childbearing and thereby reducing younger generations' willingness to have children (Wei & Zhang, 2011).

Social changes also influence fertility behavior. Increasing participation in higher education, particularly among women, delays marriage, while shifting values toward

individualism and career prioritization further reduce willingness to marry and have children (Luo et al., 2025).

Therefore, China's low fertility rate bears the historical imprint of the one-child policy while also reflecting the broader demographic transition associated with modernization. Although the one-child policy accelerated the decline in fertility, factors such as the cost of child-rearing, employment pressures, work-family conflict, gender inequality, and shifting values have caused low fertility rates to persist even after the policy ended. This perspective also lays the groundwork for the subsequent comparison between China and Japan. Despite their differing policy histories, both nations' current low fertility rates are increasingly shaped by similar modern social structures.

2.3 Socioeconomic Implications in China

As discussed in Section 1.2, population aging and declining fertility can jointly contract the labor force and domestic market, place pressure on welfare and healthcare systems, and challenge the existing old-age support system.

According to Xinhua (2013), China's working-age population has been declining since 2012, weighing on economic growth through labor-supply and productivity channels and contributing to the slower growth projected by the World Bank (2024b). Population aging also increases the fiscal burden, while China's current pay-as-you-go pension system faces sustainability concerns (Dorfman et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2023).

Beyond pension expenditures, population aging significantly increases demand for medical and long-term care. Older adults are more prone to chronic conditions, long-term illnesses, and age-related disabilities, necessitating frequent medical services, rehabilitation, and

assistance with daily living (Wu et al., 2023). Although medical advances extend life expectancy, a longer lifespan does not guarantee that all older adults can live completely independently. As the elderly population grows, relying solely on hospitals for short-term treatment is no longer sufficient; society must also develop home-based care, community-based care, rehabilitation services, and specialized long-term care facilities. Consequently, the challenges posed by population aging extend beyond rising healthcare costs to include the establishment of formal service systems capable of providing sustainable care.

Simultaneously, China's traditional model of family-based elderly care is being reshaped by changing family structures. Low fertility rates have reduced family sizes, potentially placing the burden of caring for multiple elderly relatives on individual young family members. Urbanization and population mobility have driven large numbers of young people to leave their hometowns for work in cities or other regions, resulting in prolonged separation between adult children and their aging parents. The combined effects of smaller family units, low birth rates, and population mobility have increasingly constrained the time, financial resources, and daily care that families can provide. Particularly in rural areas and regions experiencing population outflow, older adults may lack stable family support and struggle to access adequate professional services. This implies that while the family remains a vital component of China's elderly care system, relying solely on the family is increasingly inadequate to meet the expanding demand for care.

The separation of family members and the weakening of community ties can also expose older adults to loneliness, social isolation, and mental health issues. Thus, population aging is not merely a fiscal or medical challenge; it also concerns the social relationships, dignity, and quality of life of older adults. Policies that focus exclusively on pension amounts and medical facilities

while neglecting social engagement to improve the well-being of the elderly. Therefore, elderly care policies should also provide opportunities for older adults to participate in community life, cultural activities, sports, interest-based groups, and volunteer work, thereby helping them maintain social connections and a sense of purpose.

In the Chinese context, regional inequality is also exacerbated. Population aging is spatially uneven, with rural areas often having a higher proportion of elderly residents (World Bank, 2024b). As young people migrate to urban areas in pursuit of greater economic opportunities, older adults are left behind in rural areas, intensifying regional inequality and placing pressure on local welfare and public health systems (World Bank, 2024b).

Nevertheless, the elderly population should not be viewed merely as recipients of social welfare or as an economic burden. Many healthy older adults possess accumulated professional experience, knowledge, and social networks and remain capable of participating in society through flexible employment, community governance, caregiving support, and volunteer activities. The goal of “active aging” is not to require all older adults to continue working, but rather to provide opportunities for participation in economic and social life that are based on individual health, capabilities, and preferences. By establishing age- and physical-condition-tailored mechanisms for employment and community engagement, the human and social capital of older adults can continue to contribute to society, thereby partially alleviating the pressures associated with population aging.

Overall, China’s current population aging is shaped by the historical legacy of the one-child policy and driven by structural factors such as modernization, urbanization, the cost of child-rearing, the gender division of labor, and shifting values. A shrinking workforce, pressure

on pension systems, the demand for long-term care, and the urban-rural divide constitute the primary challenges for China's future population governance. The next chapter examines the policies adopted by Japan amidst similar demographic dynamics to assess which consequences of aging were mitigated, thereby establishing a comparative basis for evaluating their applicability to China.

3. Japan: Demographic Evolution and Policy Response

3.1 Demographic Trends in Japan

Japan has experienced a long-term decline in fertility, with rates remaining far below the replacement level over the past 50 years. According to data from the World Bank (2024d) as presented in Figure 5, the total fertility rate decreased from around 2.1 in the 1970s to a low of 1.26 in 2005. Since 2015, Japan's fertility rate has resumed its decline, falling from 1.4 in 2015 to 1.1 in 2024 and placing Japan among the countries with the lowest fertility rates in the world.

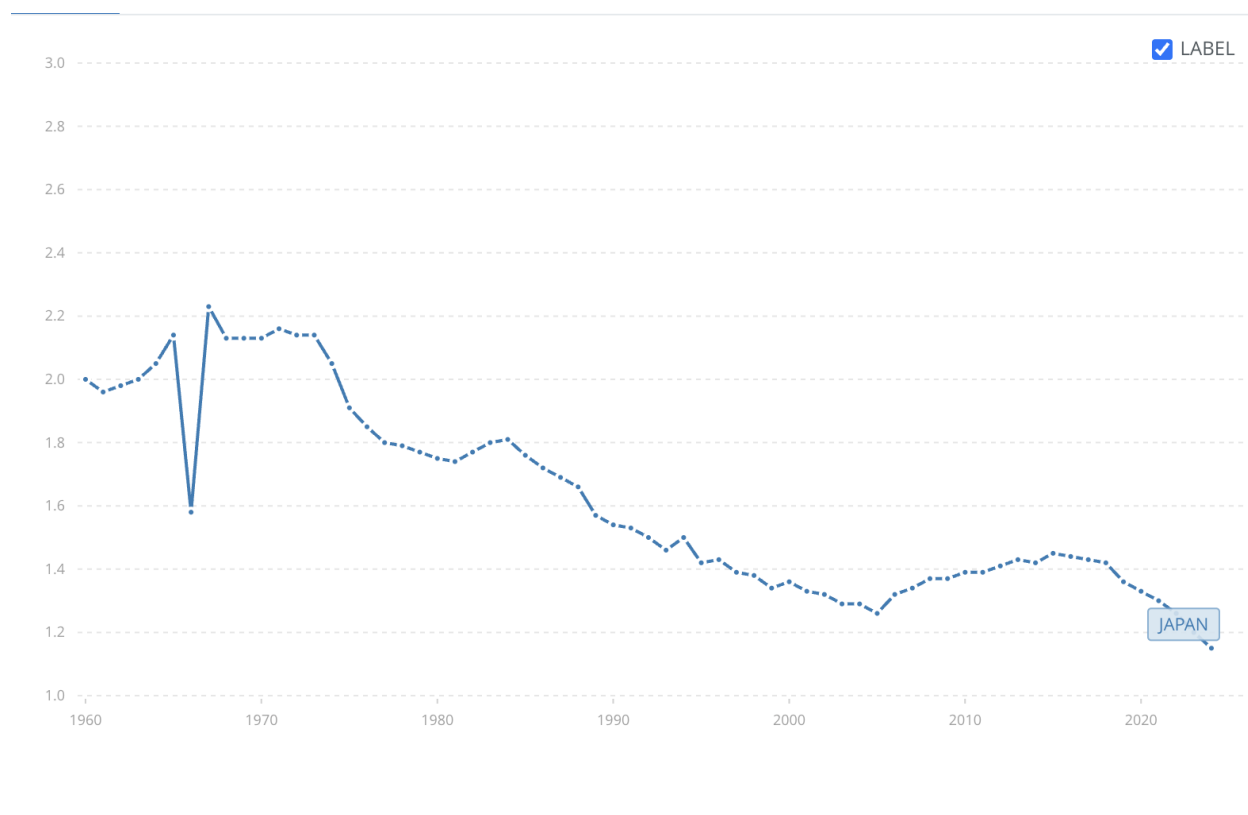


Figure 5, Fertility Rate in Japan, 1960–2024

Japan is also known for its high life expectancy. According to data from the World Bank (2024e), as illustrated in Figure 6, Japan's life expectancy has continued to increase since 1960,

rising from 68 years to 84 years in 2024, the highest level in the world. However, this high life expectancy is also associated with a large aging population. According to the Statistics Bureau of Japan (2025), the share of the population aged 65 and over rose from 12% to 29% of the total population. Together with declining domestic birth rates, increased longevity contributes to population aging, framing the issue as a necessary trade-off associated with longer lives. As in China, this creates economic and systemic pressure on Japanese society.

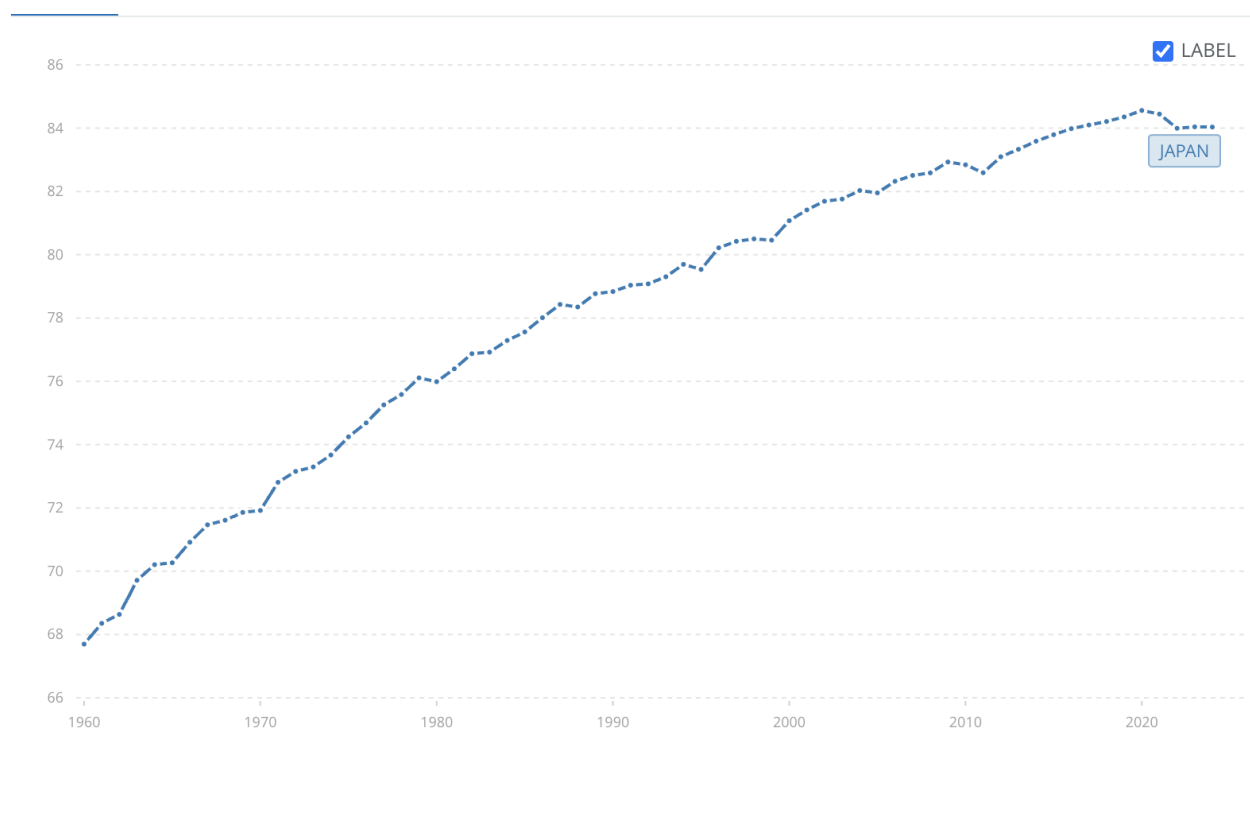


Figure 6, Life expectancy in Japan, 1960–2024

3.2 Structural Causes of Low Fertility

Unlike China, Japan's low fertility rate is the result of natural social evolution. It is primarily caused by structural factors, including the employment system, economic pressures, and changing social norms regarding marriage and childbearing behavior (OECD, 2024).

During the twentieth century, Japan's employment system became known for long working hours and intense workplace demands. Long working hours reduce people's free time, leading them to prioritize rest and recreation over marriage and childbearing. Meanwhile, in order to remain competitive, companies may also maintain workplace practices that discourage childbearing. This work-family imbalance further suppresses people's willingness to have children (OECD, 2024).

As traditional domestic gender roles remain prevalent in many Japanese families, women are generally assigned primary responsibility for childbearing and childcare. For many women, having children often means leaving the labor market. As more women gain greater employment opportunities through education, this incompatibility between work and family naturally discourages them from marrying or having children, thereby reducing the fertility rate (OECD, 2024).

Economic pressures also discourage Japanese people from having children (IPSS, 2017). The financial costs associated with childbearing generally include housing, education, and childcare expenses (OECD, 2024). Having children in modern society, particularly in Japan, is often perceived as economically burdensome. Raising children accounts for a substantial share of household expenditure that could otherwise be allocated to investment, healthcare, and

entertainment (OECD, 2024; IPSS, 2017). Children in Japan today are therefore more likely to be perceived as an economic cost than as an economic return (IPSS, 2017).

These factors reinforce one another and collectively shape new social norms (OECD, 2024). In contemporary Japan, having children is no longer considered a necessity of life but a costly life choice that requires sufficient financial means (IPSS, 2017). As a result, Japan's total fertility rate has declined over the long term, exerting a substantial adverse effect on Japanese economic growth (OECD, 2024). To reverse this trend, macroeconomic intervention by the government is necessary (Cabinet Office, 2024).

3.3 Policy Responses to Population Aging

In response to workforce contraction, the Japanese government not only provides incentives to young families but also seeks to expand the workforce. Specifically, the government aims to increase labor force participation among social groups with comparatively low participation rates, including women and older adults (OECD, 2024). Because the effects of measures to raise fertility take decades to materialize, this more immediate approach helps the government maintain national productivity in the short term (OECD, 2024).

In addition to diversifying its workforce composition, Japan is placing greater emphasis on developing individual human capital. This is demonstrated by the government's encouragement of reskilling and lifelong learning and its support for adaptation to technological change (OECD, 2024; Cabinet Office, 2024). Education and skills policies, therefore, form part of Japan's demographic response, because the goal is not only to increase the number of workers but also to enhance each worker's productivity and adaptability (OECD, 2024).

The country's welfare system is also adapting to the new demographic structure. The government introduced the Long-Term Care Insurance system to address the rapid growth of the elderly population, aiming to reduce the burden of eldercare on families and provide formal, professional care services for older adults (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare [MHLW], n.d.). It also addresses the mobility constraints faced by older adults by providing home visits, nursing care, and community-based services (MHLW, n.d.). By tailoring services to individual needs, the system enables a more efficient allocation of care resources and provides greater accessibility through its community-based structure (MHLW, n.d.). This reflects a policy shift from collective provision toward more individualized provision (MHLW, n.d.).

To address the declining fertility rate, the Japanese government is working to build a fertility-friendly society by reducing the costs and difficulties of child-rearing and thereby encouraging childbearing (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, n.d.). Measures include providing child support, guaranteeing parental leave, and developing child-friendly facilities (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, n.d.). These measures help people in Japan achieve a better work-life balance, reflecting a shift toward more human-centered policies (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, n.d.).

In conclusion, Japan's policy response focuses primarily on three areas: expanding the workforce, revising welfare systems to adapt to demographic change, and introducing welfare policies to reduce barriers to childbearing among young people. Efforts to expand the workforce involve encouraging groups with historically lower labor force participation, particularly women and older adults, to enter or remain in employment, while emphasizing the development of human capital through reskilling programs and lifelong learning (OECD, 2024). These measures are complemented by welfare policies that reduce both the time and financial costs of

child-rearing, thereby promoting work-life balance and individual well-being and reflecting a human-centered policy transition (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, n.d.). Meanwhile, the welfare system has shifted from collective provision toward community-based services to allocate healthcare resources more efficiently and adapt to demographic change (MHLW, n.d.). Together, these three transformations illustrate Japan's adaptation to an aging society through changes in both its economic structure and social welfare systems (OECD, 2024).

3.4 Evaluation of Policy Effectiveness

Overall, Japan's policies have achieved notable success in helping society adapt to population aging, yet their impact on reversing low fertility rates and population decline has been limited. Consequently, evaluating these policies requires distinguishing between two distinct objectives: first, whether the policies have mitigated the economic and social consequences of an aging population; and second, whether they have altered the long-term trends of low fertility and population shrinkage. By this standard, Japan has been relatively successful in the first regard but has yet to achieve a fundamental breakthrough in the second (OECD, 2024).

Japan's Long-Term Care Insurance system stands out as a successful example of an adaptive policy. Before the system's establishment, elderly care was largely provided by families, with the burden typically falling on women. As household sizes shrank and female labor force participation rose, relying solely on family-based care became unsustainable. Through the provision of home-based care, nursing services, institutional care, and community support, the Long-Term Care Insurance system shifted part of the responsibility for elderly care from private households to a social service system supported by public policy (MHLW, n.d.). This transition not only improved older adults' access to professional services but also alleviated the caregiving

burden on family members, particularly women. Thus, the system's primary achievement lies not in reducing the proportion of the elderly population but in improving the allocation of care resources and enhancing the quality of life of older adults within an aging society.

Japan's labor policies have also partially mitigated the impact of a shrinking working-age population. The government has expanded labor force participation by raising retirement ages, encouraging companies to retain older workers, supporting flexible work arrangements, and promoting women's entry into and continued participation in the labor market (OECD, 2024; Cabinet Office, 2024). At the same time, lifelong learning and vocational retraining initiatives have helped workers adapt to technological and industrial changes while increasing individual productivity. For older adults, lifelong learning serves not only an economic function but also helps maintain social connections, personal capabilities, and social engagement. Although such policies cannot increase the size of the younger population, they enable fuller use of existing human capital; consequently, their effects are often more immediate than waiting for new cohorts to enter the labor market.

However, Japan's long-standing policies to support childbearing have failed to significantly reverse the trend of low fertility. Child allowances, childcare services, parental leave, and financial support for families can alleviate some child-rearing costs and improve living conditions for families with children (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, n.d.). While these measures are not entirely ineffective from the perspective of family welfare, their impact on restoring fertility to replacement levels has been very limited. Japan's total fertility rate has remained consistently below the replacement level, indicating that reducing direct economic costs is insufficient to fundamentally alter individual choices regarding marriage and childbearing (OECD, 2024).

The limited effectiveness of pro-natalist policies stems from the fact that Japan's low fertility rate is rooted in broader issues concerning the labor market, work culture, the gender division of labor, and marriage structures. Long working hours and demands for intense professional commitment make balancing work and family life difficult; despite increased female labor force participation, women continue to shoulder the majority of childcare and domestic responsibilities; employment instability and economic uncertainty among young people delay marriage; and the strong link between childbearing and marriage in Japan means that remaining single or marrying late directly lowers fertility rates (McDonald, 2013; OECD, 2024). Such structural conditions cannot be rapidly transformed through isolated subsidies or short-term policies.

The greater visibility of results from "adaptation policies," compared with policies aimed solely at stimulating fertility, is also related to the timeframes involved. Policies addressing long-term care, elderly employment, and lifelong learning offer direct solutions to existing challenges in elderly care and the labor force; by contrast, even if efforts to boost fertility succeed, it takes many years for the resulting generation to enter the workforce. Consequently, adaptation policies can enhance the functioning of an aging society relatively quickly, whereas pro-natalist policies exert only a slow and uncertain influence on long-term demographic structures.

Japan's relative success in adapting to an aging population also relies on specific institutional conditions. Before the aging of its population intensified significantly, Japan had already established mature healthcare, pension, and social welfare systems, alongside relatively stable administrative institutions, a high level of economic development, and robust local public

service capabilities (World Bank, 2015). These conditions enabled Japan to finance, coordinate, and implement nationwide policies regarding elderly care and the labor force over the long term.

Therefore, the effectiveness of Japan's policies cannot be attributed solely to policy design; it is also closely linked to the country's fiscal capacity, institutional foundations, and administrative capabilities. In summary, Japan's experience demonstrates that long-term care, community services, expanded labor force participation, and lifelong learning can enhance a society's ability to adapt to an aging population. In contrast, childbirth subsidies alone are insufficient to reverse low fertility rates. This suggests that the most valuable lesson Japan offers China may not be how to restore a youthful demographic structure, but rather how to sustain the functioning of economic and social systems amid continued population aging. The next chapter further evaluates the practical applicability of these experiences to China, taking into account differences between the two countries in population size, stage of development, industrial structure, and social security systems.

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1 Similarities in Demographic Mechanisms

Although China and Japan have distinct historical backgrounds and population policies, population aging in both countries is driven by two factors: low fertility rates and increased longevity. Improvements in healthcare, public health, and living standards have lowered mortality rates and raised average life expectancy. At the same time, a sustained decline in births has reduced the size of the young population. Together, these trends have increased the proportion of the elderly population and led to a relative decline in the working-age population (Bongaarts, 2009; World Bank, 2015). This shared mechanism of demographic transition makes Japan a valuable comparative case for analyzing China's future demographic changes.

There are also striking similarities in the structural causes of low fertility in both countries. First, the costs of housing, education, healthcare, and childcare have increased the economic burden on childbearing families. Particularly in societies characterized by intense educational competition, families often need to invest substantial resources in their children's education, thereby raising both the actual and anticipated costs of having children (Boydell et al., 2023). Second, both countries experience significant work-family conflict. Long working hours, career competition, and income uncertainty prompt young people to delay marriage and childbearing, making it difficult to reconcile parenting with career advancement.

Traditional gender divisions of labor further increase the opportunity cost of childbearing for women. Despite rising levels of education and labor force participation among women in

both China and Japan, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of childcare and domestic responsibilities. Expanded opportunities for women in the public sphere have not been fully matched by an equitable distribution of caregiving duties within the home; consequently, some women choose to delay marriage and childbirth or limit the number of children they have to avoid long-term negative impacts on their careers (McDonald, 2013).

Urbanization and shifting social values also influence marriage and childbearing behaviors in both countries. Increasing importance is placed on individual autonomy, career development, and lifestyle choices, and marriage and childbearing are no longer universally viewed as essential life stages. Given that childbearing in both China and Japan still predominantly occurs within marriage, trends toward delayed marriage or remaining unmarried directly contribute to lower fertility rates. Thus, China and Japan do not represent entirely independent demographic cases; rather, they face many similar pressures associated with modernization. These commonalities suggest that while Japan's experience offers valuable insights for China, it does not imply that specific policies can be directly replicated.

4.2 Key Structural Differences

Differences between China and Japan determine the extent to which Japanese policies are applicable in China. First, there is a fundamental difference in population size. Japan can establish long-term care, community-based medical services, and local elderly care across a relatively small population. In contrast, China must provide services for a much larger and more widely dispersed elderly population. Implementing similar service standards in China may require greater financial investment, more professional personnel, and more complex

administrative coordination. Therefore, the results achieved by Japanese policies in small-scale communities cannot be automatically extrapolated to China as a whole.

Second, regional and urban-rural disparities in China are far greater than those in Japan. Significant differences exist among China's coastal and inland regions, urban and rural areas, and provinces in economic development, fiscal capacity, demographic structure, medical resources, and the provision of elderly care (World Bank, 2015). Regions experiencing population outflow may face both high levels of aging and weak fiscal capacity, whereas economically developed cities possess more resources to establish formal elderly care services. A uniform policy could yield vastly different results across regions; thus, China needs to implement population and elderly care policies in a regionally differentiated and phased manner.

Third, the two countries were at different stages of economic development when they entered the aging process. Japan had already become a high-income economy and established relatively mature social security and healthcare systems by the time its aging process significantly deepened. In contrast, China is aging rapidly while still needing to complete industrial upgrading, narrow regional disparities, and improve its social security system. This means that China faces simultaneous challenges of development and distribution when addressing aging, requiring a more complex allocation of fiscal resources among elderly care, healthcare, education, and economic development.

Fourth, the industrial structures of the two countries differ. Japan's economy is dominated by the service sector and high-value-added industries, in which certain roles can accommodate older workers through flexible work arrangements, extended employment, and skills upgrading. China still has a large manufacturing sector and labor-intensive industries, with some positions

requiring significant physical strength, specific working hours, and particular production environments. Consequently, policies such as delaying retirement and promoting employment among the elderly cannot be implemented uniformly across all sectors. Still, they must be adjusted according to job type, health status, and labor intensity.

Finally, Japan possesses relatively mature and unified pension, healthcare, and long-term care systems. In contrast, China's social security system still exhibits disparities across different population groups, urban and rural areas, and regions. Uneven system coverage, disparities in pension benefits, and varying local fiscal capacities all affect the effectiveness of policy implementation (Dorfman et al., 2013). Therefore, the applicability of the Japanese experience to China depends not only on the policy itself but also on whether China possesses the requisite fiscal, administrative, and social security foundations.

4.3 Explaining Differences in Policy Outcomes

Based on the aforementioned similarities and differences, the applicability of the Japanese experience to China can be categorized into three levels: high, conditional, and low. This distinction avoids treating Japan as a policy template that can be directly replicated. It allows for a more accurate assessment of the extent to which the Japanese experience applies to China.

First, long-term care, community-based elderly care, active aging, and lifelong learning have significant strategic directions. Both China and Japan face challenges such as shrinking family sizes, declining family caregiving capacity, and rising demand for elderly care; thus, shifting some caregiving responsibilities from families to formal social services is an approach both nations must consider. Japan's long-term care insurance and integrated community care

systems demonstrate that medical care, rehabilitation, daily care, and community support should be coordinated rather than provided solely by hospitals or families (MHLW, n.d.). Active aging and lifelong learning are equally applicable to China, as they can improve the quality of life of older adults while continuing to draw on their knowledge, experience, and social capital. However, China needs to establish tiered service systems tailored to specific urban-rural and regional conditions rather than simply replicating Japan's unified system.

Second, policies regarding delayed retirement, elderly employment, and increased female labor force participation have conditional applicability. Although these policies can expand the effective labor force and alleviate labor shortages in certain sectors, their impact depends on industrial structure, job type, and social systems. China cannot apply uniform retirement arrangements to all workers. Extending working lives may be difficult for manual laborers, people in poor health, and individuals in high-intensity jobs. In contrast, professional, managerial, and certain service roles are better suited to flexible retirement. Furthermore, efforts to increase female labor force participation must be accompanied by childcare services, anti-discrimination policies, and a more equitable distribution of family responsibilities; otherwise, the conflict between employment and childbearing for women could intensify.

Third, relying solely on cash subsidies to boost fertility rates has low applicability and limited expected effectiveness. Japan's experience indicates that while child allowances and financial aid can improve family welfare, they are insufficient to alter work cultures, gender-based divisions of labor, housing costs, educational competition, or marriage patterns (OECD, 2024). China may offer childbirth subsidies, but these should not be viewed as the primary means of restoring fertility to replacement levels. A more effective approach involves

reducing childcare and education costs, improving housing conditions for young families, guaranteeing parental leave, and mitigating the career penalties women face due to childbirth.

Overall, the comparison indicates that Japan's experience has selective applicability to China. Approaches involving long-term care, community-based elderly care, active aging, and lifelong learning offer valuable policy insights; however, measures such as raising the retirement age and increasing labor force participation require adjustment to account for China's industrial and demographic diversity, while relying solely on cash subsidies to raise fertility yields limited results. Accordingly, the preliminary answer to the research question is that although Japan's experience provides important principles and policy directions for China, it cannot serve as a blueprint for direct replication. Building on this assessment, the next chapter proposes specific policy recommendations tailored to China's population scale, regional disparities, and stage of development.

5. Policy Implications for China

5.1 From Reversing to Adapting

A comparative analysis of population aging in China and Japan reveals that policy failures do not simply cause the future but rather a structural phenomenon associated with modernization. With economic development, urbanization, rising educational attainment, and shifting social values, declining fertility rates and population aging have gradually become common challenges faced by many developed countries and regions. Japan's experience over the past few decades shows that even with sustained government initiatives to encourage childbearing, such as childcare subsidies, parental leave, and childcare services, restoring the fertility rate to replacement level is difficult. Therefore, population aging should not be viewed as a short-term demographic anomaly but rather as a long-term development trend in modern society.

This conclusion also applies to China. Although China's population aging has been influenced to some extent by family planning policy, as discussed in Chapter 4, China and Japan share a high degree of similarity in the mechanisms underlying low fertility. High childcare costs, work-family conflict, traditional gender roles, and shifting values in the context of urbanization all weaken the fertility intentions of younger generations. Therefore, even if birth restrictions are completely lifted and fertility incentives are further expanded, fundamentally reversing the trend of population aging will remain difficult.

Based on the above analysis, China's future population policy objectives should gradually shift from “reversing population aging” to “adapting to population aging.” This does not mean

abandoning efforts to promote childbearing, but rather acknowledging that population aging may become a long-term reality for Chinese society. On this basis, the government should devote greater attention to reducing the economic and social effects of population aging, including a shrinking labor force, increased pressure on social security, and growing demand for medical resources.

Therefore, China should establish a population governance framework centered on adapting to population aging. On the one hand, this involves slowing population decline through appropriate fertility-support policies; on the other hand, it involves improving society's adaptability to changes in population structure through labor market reform, social security reform, and the development of a comprehensive medical and elderly care system. Compared with simply pursuing growth in the birth rate, this adaptation-oriented policy approach is better aligned with China's current demographic realities and more sustainable in the long term.

5.2 Maintaining Economic Productivity with an Aging Population

A shrinking labor force is one of the most direct economic effects of an aging population. As the working-age population continues to decline, China may face challenges such as an insufficient labor supply, slower economic growth, and labor shortages in certain industries. Therefore, maintaining economic productivity should be a key objective of policies addressing population aging.

Japan has accumulated experience in addressing labor shortages. Its principal measures include increasing labor force participation among women and older adults, extending working lives, and promoting lifelong learning and vocational skills training. These measures have alleviated labor shortages to some extent and helped Japan maintain economic stability.

However, China and Japan differ significantly in their industrial structures and population sizes. Japan has completed its industrial upgrading and focuses on the service sector and high-value-added industries, while China still has a large manufacturing sector and labor-intensive industries. Therefore, although Japan's experience in increasing labor force participation among older adults is valuable, it cannot be directly replicated in China.

In this context, China can gradually implement a delayed-retirement policy to encourage healthy older adults to continue participating in the labor market. At the same time, a more comprehensive lifelong learning system and vocational retraining mechanism should be established to improve workers' ability to adapt to industrial transformation. Compared with simply expanding the labor force, increasing labor productivity may be more consistent with China's future demographic reality. Furthermore, China can raise labor productivity through advances in artificial intelligence, automated production, and digital technologies, thereby partially offsetting the effects of a shrinking working-age population. Technological progress can replace certain repetitive and standardized tasks, optimize production processes, and enable a smaller workforce to generate higher output. However, technology cannot fully substitute for human labor, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, elderly care, and education, or in roles requiring complex interpersonal interaction and professional judgment. Consequently, technological innovation should not be viewed as a standalone solution to population aging; rather, it must be integrated with vocational training, industrial upgrading, and workforce skills transformation. China's future economic growth model can gradually reduce its reliance on labor force expansion and instead rely more heavily on productivity gains and technological innovation, effectively transforming the traditional "demographic dividend" into a "productivity and technology dividend."

5.3 Improving Social Security and Elderly Care Systems

As the population ages, pressure on the social security system will continue to mount. A rising proportion of elderly citizens implies not only increased expenditure on pensions and healthcare but also a need to reconsider how to maintain their quality of life and capacity for social engagement. Therefore, drawing on Japan's experience, China should advance comprehensive reforms to its elderly care service systems, community support networks, and pension schemes in order to enhance societal resilience amid population aging.

5.3.1 Improving Elderly Care Services and Medical Security Systems

Japan has long provided medical care, home-based assistance, and community support services to older adults through its Long-Term Care Insurance system and community-based care networks. These measures have alleviated families' caregiving burden to some extent and improved the quality of life of older adults. However, significant differences exist between China and Japan in population size and levels of regional development. China's population is far larger than Japan's, and there are marked regional disparities in fiscal capacity, medical resources, and demographic structure; consequently, the Japanese model cannot be directly replicated.

Given China's specific circumstances, the future development of the elderly care system should adopt a multilevel and diversified approach. In urban areas, efforts should focus on expanding community-based care, integrating medical and elderly care services, and enhancing the professionalism of care provision. In rural areas, the focus should remain on home-based care while strengthening primary healthcare systems to improve basic medical coverage for older adults. Furthermore, stronger chronic disease management, health education, and preventive

medical services can improve the health of the elderly population while alleviating long-term pressure on the healthcare system.

5.3.2 Promoting Active Aging and Community Participation

Population aging is not merely an economic or fiscal issue; it is also a social and psychological one. As life expectancy rises, an increasing number of older adults experience a prolonged period of healthy life after retirement. However, a lack of opportunities for social engagement can lead to loneliness, social isolation, and mental health issues, thereby undermining their quality of life.

In this regard, Japan's experience offers valuable insights. Many Japanese communities regularly organize cultural events, interest-based clubs, volunteer activities, and sports programs to encourage older adults to remain active in community life. Through such engagement, older adults can maintain social connections and preserve their physical and mental well-being, ultimately leading to more active and fulfilling lives in later years. By contrast, China's current elderly care policies focus primarily on pensions, medical services, and the construction of care facilities, while giving relatively less attention to older adults' social participation and psychological needs. Therefore, Chinese communities could draw on Japan's experience to further develop universities for older adults, community activity centers, interest-based associations, and volunteer organizations, thereby creating more opportunities for older adults to participate in social life. Population aging does not imply that older adults are merely recipients of social resources; on the contrary, many possess extensive experience, knowledge, and social capital. Encouraging older adults to remain involved in community affairs and social activities

can not only improve their quality of life but also strengthen community cohesion and social stability.

5.3.3 Promoting Equity-Oriented Reform of the Pension System

Beyond the elderly care service system itself, the issue of equity within China's pension system also warrants attention. Currently, significant disparities in pension benefits persist among different groups in China. There are marked gaps in pension levels between retirees from government agencies and public institutions, urban employees, and urban and rural residents, as well as substantial regional variations in benefits. These disparities risk widening further as the population ages, potentially undermining social equity.

Compared with Japan's system, China's pension system faces challenges not only in sustainability but also in distributive equity. If significant disparities in pension benefits persist over the long term, the pressures associated with population aging could develop into broader issues of social equity and even erode public trust in the social security system. Consequently, future reforms must prioritize equity alongside system sustainability.

Specifically, China could gradually advance the national pooling of pension funds to narrow regional disparities in benefits; raise basic pension levels for urban and rural residents to improve livelihood security for older adults in rural areas; and simultaneously refine pension financing mechanisms, broaden the contribution base, and enhance operational efficiency. Only by balancing equity and efficiency can the pension system operate stably over the long term in an aging society.

Overall, future reforms to China's social security system should extend beyond merely meeting the basic living needs of older adults; they should also aim to enhance their quality of

life, capacity for social participation, and perceived benefits from the system. Japan's experience demonstrates that although population aging increases social costs, society can adapt effectively to demographic change by improving elderly care services, promoting active aging, and enhancing systemic equity.

5.4 Building a Fertility-Friendly Environment

Although population aging is difficult to reverse completely, slowing the rate of population decline remains important. Therefore, while adapting to population aging, China still needs to reduce the barriers to childbearing that young families face by improving the fertility environment.

The Japanese government has long implemented pro-natalist policies such as childcare subsidies, parental leave, and expanded childcare services. Although these measures have achieved some success in improving family welfare, their effect on raising the birth rate has been relatively limited. This illustrates that fiscal subsidies alone cannot fundamentally resolve the problem of low birth rates.

Compared with Japan, young Chinese families face more pronounced pressures related to housing and educational competition. High housing prices, high education costs, and work-family conflict have become significant factors influencing fertility intentions. Therefore, China's future population policy should not be limited to providing fertility subsidies but should focus more on reducing childcare costs and improving families' living conditions. For example, it could expand the supply of affordable childcare services, reduce preschool education costs, improve housing support for young families, and further strengthen parental leave and flexible

employment systems, thereby alleviating the economic and time burdens families experience during child-rearing.

However, it should be recognized that the primary goal of these measures is not to return fertility rates to replacement level, but rather to slow population decline and improve family well-being. Demographic change is a long-term process with profound social and economic foundations; therefore, the effects of policy intervention are often limited and gradual.

5.5 Limitations and Implementation Conditions

Although the aforementioned policy recommendations can enhance China's capacity to adapt to an aging population, their effectiveness is constrained by factors such as the pace of demographic change, fiscal and administrative capacity, and regional disparities. Population policies should not be presented as a means of “solving” the aging issue in the short term; rather, they should be viewed as long-term institutional adjustments to mitigate the economic and social costs associated with changes in the demographic structure.

First, the impact of fertility policies tends to be limited and gradual. Measures such as housing support, child allowances, childcare services, and parental leave can alleviate some of the costs borne by young families and improve household well-being; however, decisions regarding marriage and childbearing are also influenced by factors like employment stability, career progression, the gender division of labor, and personal values. Japan's long-standing implementation of fertility support policies, which has yet to restore fertility rates to replacement levels, demonstrates that financial incentives alone cannot alter deep-seated social structures. Furthermore, even if fertility rates were to rebound, it would take years for the new cohort to

enter the labor market; thus, fertility policies cannot provide immediate relief for current labor shortages or pension system pressures.

Second, Japanese policies cannot be directly replicated in China. Japan's systems for long-term care, community-based elderly care, and elderly employment are built upon a foundation of high economic development, a mature social security system, and relatively stable administrative capacity. In contrast, China has a much larger population and more pronounced urban-rural and regional disparities; some localities also face challenges such as limited fiscal revenue, insufficient medical resources, and a shortage of elderly care personnel. Therefore, while China can adopt the fundamental principles of Japan's policies, the specific financing mechanisms, service standards, and scope of implementation must be redesigned to suit China's own institutional context.

Third, different regions in China require tailored implementation strategies. Economically developed cities can take the lead in developing professional community-based elderly care, integrated medical and elderly care services, and long-term care insurance. Meanwhile, regions experiencing population outflows and weaker fiscal capacity should prioritize securing basic pensions, primary healthcare, home-based care, and mobile services. Similarly, regions with a concentration of manufacturing should not adopt the same arrangements for delayed retirement and elderly employment as those in regions where the service sector predominates. Although the central government can set basic protection targets and define the institutional direction, local policies must be adjusted according to demographic structure, fiscal capacity, and the availability of public services.

Fourth, all policy recommendations face fiscal and administrative constraints. Initiatives such as long-term care, pension reform, childcare services, and community facilities require stable funding, professional personnel, and interdepartmental coordination. If policy commitments exceed local fiscal and administrative capacity for implementation, they could further widen regional disparities in service provision. Therefore, policies should be implemented in stages: first by establishing basic safeguards and pilot mechanisms, and then by gradually expanding coverage based on actual outcomes. At the same time, an evaluation system should be established to assess policy impacts on labor force participation, access to elderly care services, family burdens, social equity, and the quality of life of older adults.

Therefore, China's efforts to draw lessons from Japan's experience should be guided by the principles of selectivity and localization: China should adopt institutional directions suited to an aging population while adjusting implementation methods to account for its urban-rural disparities, industrial structure, pension inequalities, and local fiscal capacity. The goal of these policies is not to promise a complete reversal of aging, but rather to enhance economic productivity, social security equity, elderly care capacity, and family well-being. The conclusion synthesizes these findings to directly address the extent to which Japan's experience applies to China and to articulate the broader significance of this comparative analysis.

6. Conclusion

This study examines population aging in China and Japan. By analyzing changes in population structure, the mechanisms underlying low fertility, and policies addressing population aging, it explores the causes and social impacts of demographic change as well as the implications of Japan's experience for China. The study finds that despite significant differences in population size, stage of economic development, and historical background, both China and Japan face common challenges, including low fertility rates, population aging, and a shrinking working-age population. Furthermore, the mechanisms underlying low fertility in the two countries are highly similar and include rising childcare costs, work-family conflict, traditional gender roles, and shifts in social values during urbanization. A single policy or historical event does not solely cause population aging, but rather results from the combined effects of multiple social, economic, and cultural factors during modernization.

The study also demonstrates that Japan's experience as one of the world's first aging societies offers valuable insights into addressing population aging. Faced with a shrinking labor force and a growing elderly population, Japan has mitigated the economic and social pressures of population aging to some extent through measures such as increasing labor force participation among women and older adults, promoting lifelong learning and vocational retraining, improving the long-term care insurance system, and developing community-based elderly care services. These policies demonstrate that the adverse effects of population aging are manageable and that governments can improve society's adaptability to demographic change through institutional reforms and policy adjustments.

However, Japan's experience also reveals the limitations of population policy. Despite the Japanese government's long-term implementation of pro-natalist policies such as childcare subsidies, expanded childcare services, and parental leave, the fertility rate has consistently failed to recover to replacement level. This is because low fertility is rooted in deep-seated structural factors, including work culture, the division of labor within the family, housing costs, and shifting social values. These factors cannot be fundamentally changed within a short period through a single policy. Therefore, Japan's experience shows that the consequences of population aging can be mitigated and society can adapt to them, but the trend itself is difficult to reverse completely.

When drawing lessons from Japan's experience, China must also fully consider the differences between the two countries. China has a population far larger than Japan's and also experiences significant regional development imbalances, with marked differences across regions in economic development, fiscal capacity, medical resources, and demographic structure. Furthermore, China retains a large manufacturing sector and labor-intensive industries, making it more dependent on the labor force than Japan. Therefore, although Japan's policy experience can offer important insights for China, it cannot be directly replicated; it must be adapted to China's specific circumstances. In other words, Japan should be considered a valuable comparative case rather than a policy template to be copied directly.

Based on the above analysis, this study argues that China's future population policy should gradually shift from “reversing population aging” to “adapting to population aging.” The preceding analysis indicates that low fertility and population aging are largely structural consequences of modernization; therefore, relying solely on pro-natalist policies is unlikely to alter the long-term trend. Rather than focusing exclusively on increasing the birth rate, China

needs to prioritize maintaining economic growth, ensuring social welfare, and promoting social stability in an aging society. Future population governance should therefore encompass multiple levels: maintaining economic productivity through delayed retirement, lifelong learning, and technological innovation; strengthening social security through pension reform, improved healthcare systems, and the establishment of long-term care systems; and slowing population decline by reducing childcare costs and improving family support systems. Only by establishing a coordinated framework for economic, social, and population policy can the adverse effects of changes in population structure be effectively mitigated.

Overall, this study argues that population aging is both a challenge and an inevitable consequence of modernization. It will place new demands on economic growth models, social security systems, and national governance capacity, while also prompting society to reconsider development models and resource allocation methods. The most important lesson for China from Japan's experience is not how to restore high fertility rates, but how to adapt effectively to population aging through institutional adjustments and social reforms under conditions of persistent low fertility. The core task facing China in the future is not to combat population aging, but to establish a more resilient and sustainable population governance system grounded in a full understanding of its long-term and structural characteristics, thereby enabling coexistence with population aging over the long term.

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