

马小哲: 年轻人为什么不生了?

Why are Young People (in China) Having Fewer Children?

A Marxist Political Economy Perspective

Translated by Hemant Adlakha

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(Mǎ Xiǎozhé: Niánqīng rén wéi shén me bù shēngle?)

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From the Editor's Desk:

China's population shrank for the third consecutive year in 2024. The official discourse and scholars believe this situation has been caused mainly due to more and more young people choosing to stay single and increasing numbers of urban, educated women are opting to delay marriage or not become 'mother'. Unable to address the issue and alarmed by the brewing social crisis, the Party and the mainstream public discourse are both blaming the country's "Gen-Z". Questioning the young people's moral standards, sociologists and experts are asking "Are the young people selfish?", "Have they been corrupted by consumerism?", "Are they being irresponsible and neglectful to their families" etc. However, Ma Xiaozhe in this article dismisses the above as superficial cultural and psychological perspectives. Ma believes by looking at the more realistic economic foundation, we will find that these moral accusations are fundamentally untenable. From a Marxist political economy perspective, it can be said that young people's choice not to have children is not a sudden cultural rebellion, but a forced and very realistic economic calculation. In short, this reflects a major structural problem in the chain of labour reproduction within the current capitalist mode of production.

Why are Young People (in China) Having Fewer Children? A Marxist Political Economy Perspective



China's declining birth rate

Source: <https://images.theconversation.com>

Summary:

The contemporary fertility crisis is essentially an eruption of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism's survival and development are based on wage labour, requiring a continuous supply of labour. However, capital's inherent pursuit of accumulation drives it to constantly undermine the conditions for the reproduction of labour power. It exploits workers in the production sphere and deprives them of their livelihoods in the consumption sphere, ultimately rendering workers unable to bear the burden of procreation. This constitutes a massive and insurmountable paradox within the system itself.

Currently, the reluctance of young people to have children has become one of the most anxiety-inducing topics in society. Seeing the precipitous drop in the birth rates, mainstream public opinion is alarmed, searching for moral explanations: Are this generation of young people too selfish? Have they been corrupted by consumerism and neglected their families? Or is it simply a lack of responsibility? However, if we step outside these superficial cultural and psychological perspectives and look at the more realistic economic foundation, we will find that these moral accusations are fundamentally untenable. From a Marxist political economy perspective, you have to admit that young people's choice not to have children is not a sudden cultural rebellion, but a forced and very realistic economic calculation. In short, this reflects a major structural problem in the chain of labor reproduction within the current capitalist mode of production.

To understand this crisis, we must first return to the most fundamental Marxist premise regarding human social production. Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, profoundly pointed out that the decisive factor in history, in the final analysis, is the production and reproduction of direct

life. This production manifests in two forms: on the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence — food, clothing, housing, and the tools necessary for them; and on the other hand, the production of humankind itself — the propagation of the species. In the long history of pre-capitalist society, the family was not only a unit of consumption but also a basic unit of production. Population growth directly corresponded to an increase in labour power and family wealth; at this time, “reproduction” and “production” were unified within the family. However, with the establishment of the capitalist mode of production, these two became historically separated. Workers lost their means of production, and for survival, their only option was to sell their labour power as a commodity to capitalists.



China's failing bid to reverse population decline
Source: Reuters/Kim Kyung-Hoon

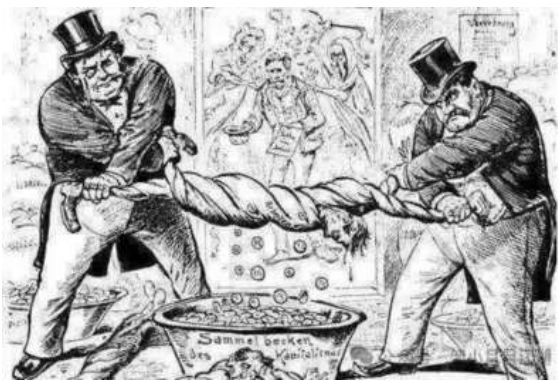
Here, a key political and economic concept emerges: the value of labour power. Marx argued that the value of labour power is determined by the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the production, development, maintenance, and continuation of labour power. In other words, a worker's wages should, in theory, not only cover his daily needs for food, clothing, and shelter (the simple reproduction of labour power), but also include the costs of raising his offspring (the expanded reproduction of labour power). Only in this way can a new generation of workers continuously replenish the workforce when older generations leave the production field due to old age, illness, or death, continuing to create surplus value for capital. This is the inherent logical requirement for the cyclical and perpetual existence of the capitalist system.

However, the development of contemporary capitalism, especially the global expansion of neoliberalism and the deep penetration of financial capital in recent decades, is fundamentally undermining this logic. We are witnessing a huge paradox: on the one hand, capital, in pursuit of profit maximisation, has an inherent incentive to suppress wages as a cost, or at least hinder real wage growth; on the other hand, in search of new

avenues for growth, capital has extended its reach into areas originally belonging to public welfare or family consumption, thoroughly commodifying and financialising essential factors for labour reproduction such as housing, education, and healthcare. This has directly led to an exponential increase in the cost of labour reproduction. The housing problem is undoubtedly the most concentrated manifestation of this contradiction. In Marx's time, the housing problem was mainly manifested in the poor and crowded living conditions of the working class; today, it manifests more as a financialised mechanism of exploitation.

In many contemporary metropolises, real estate has long since transcended its simple residential function, becoming an important financial tool for absorbing excess currency and realising capital growth. The collusion between land finance and financial capital has caused housing price increases to far outpace wage growth. For the younger generation of workers, a home, merely a means of settling down, often requires overdrawing or even emptying the savings of the entire family — including the parents' and even grandparents' generations — to barely make ends meet. When someone must shoulder decades of heavy debt just to acquire a physical space for reproduction

(a wedding home), their resources and confidence for raising the next generation are prematurely depleted. Here, capital, through the mechanism of high housing prices, is actually engaging in a secondary exploitation of workers: it not only extracts surplus value during the production process but also, through land rent and interest, reclaims a large portion of the workers' meagre wages into the hands of capital during consumption and reproduction.



Source: wyzxwk.com

Following closely behind is the distortion of education costs. In a highly competitive labour market, families must invest staggering resources in education to ensure their children qualify as competent, or even competitive, “high-level workers.” From expensive school district housing to endless tutoring classes, education is no longer merely the transmission of knowledge, but has become an arms race-like “investment in human capital.” This

investment pressure is entirely shifted onto individual families. Marx viewed this phenomenon as capital cleverly transferring the training costs required to cultivate complex labourers to the workers themselves through social competition. Parents, to prevent their children from becoming “industrial reserves” (the unemployed or low-level labourers), are forced to exhaust all their resources. This makes raising a child prohibitively expensive, turning children into an extremely expensive “luxury”, rather than the future workforce capable of sharing family responsibilities in the traditional sense.

Besides the soaring material costs, we cannot ignore the “time poverty” in the reproduction process. Capital's pursuit of surplus value is endless, inevitably manifesting as various forms of appropriation of workers' surplus labour time. In today's highly developed information technology world, the boundaries between work and life have been completely blurred. The “996” work system and the invisible overtime that requires constant availability leave workers exhausted after completing the arduous labour of material production. However, human reproduction — reproduction, raising children, education,

and emotional companionship — is a complex process requiring a significant investment of time, energy, and emotion; it cannot be accelerated like machine production on an assembly line. When capital ruthlessly encroaches on workers' non-working time, the younger generation effectively loses the physical conditions and psychological space for reproduction. In the workplace, they are atomised individuals on call at all times; back in their cramped rented rooms, they are exhausted shells drained of energy — where is the strength left to bear the weight of another life?



A woman takes in the view of Sydney Harbour bridge. Single Chinese women in their thirties are leaving behind what they consider lives of little hope in China to study in Western countries, as part of a 'run philosophy' that has gripped social media.

Source: Getty Images

Therefore, contemporary families are facing an unprecedented structural crisis. Traditional family functions have been torn apart by the economic logic of capitalism. On the one hand, as the basic

unit of labour reproduction, the family bears extremely heavy economic pressure; it must operate like a small business, meticulously managing its finances, even going into debt to maintain its operations and raise its offspring. On the other hand, the family's function as an emotional haven and safe haven is becoming fragmented under the impact of overwork and economic anxiety. Marriage is increasingly resembling an asset merger to mitigate risk, while childbirth has become an uncertain investment with extremely high risk and a very long return cycle. Against this backdrop, young people's choice not to have children, or even not to marry, is not a matter of moral depravity or ideological deviation, but a defensive reaction forced upon them by harsh economic realities — a near-tragic rational calculation. To some extent, this can be seen as a passive resistance unconsciously undertaken by the working class — since low wages and high living costs prevent me from maintaining the expanded reproduction of my own labour force, I refuse to provide new labour goods. This is like a "strike" in the field of labour reproduction.

In conclusion, the contemporary fertility crisis is essentially an eruption of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism's survival

and development are based on wage labour, requiring a continuous supply of labour. However, capital's inherent pursuit of accumulation drives it to constantly undermine the conditions for labour reproduction. It exploits workers in the production sphere and deprives them of their livelihoods in the consumption sphere, ultimately rendering workers unable to bear the burden of procreation. This constitutes a massive and insurmountable paradox within the system itself: it is devouring the most crucial element for its future operation — people. Faced with this profound structural crisis, any efforts that merely remain at the level of slogans, moralising, or superficial policy adjustments are destined to be futile. As long as the commodity attribute of labour remains unchanged, and as long as basic survival needs such as housing and education remain commodity domains dominated by the profit-seeking logic of capital, the tension and disruption of the labour reproduction chain will be an irreversible long-term trend. This is not the fault of young people, but rather an inevitable reflection of the operating logic of the economic base at this specific historical stage.

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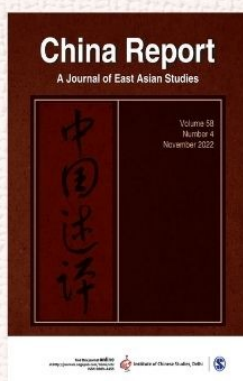


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