

**Parenthood Effects on Health and Life Satisfaction among Recent Parents in China:  
Importance of Children's Sex**

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## Abstract

This study examines how the first and second childbirths influence parental life satisfaction in contemporary China, with particular attention to the sex of the child. Building on a cost–benefit framework of parenthood and competing theories of sex preference, we explore whether children’s sex shapes the emotional and normative rewards of childbearing. Using five waves (2012–2022) of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), we analyze two longitudinal subsamples: adults transitioning to first-time parenthood and those having a second child. Employing individual-level two-way fixed effects models, we estimate within-person changes in life satisfaction, net of concurrent changes in health, financial well-being, and demographic characteristics. Our results support the “offset” hypothesis: despite the well-documented physical and economic costs of childbearing, both first and second childbirths are associated with net increases in life satisfaction. For first births, we find no significant differences in outcomes based on the child’s sex for either mothers or fathers. For second births, however, sex composition matters for fathers: having two daughters yields the largest gains in life satisfaction, followed by mixed-sex sibling combinations. In contrast, having two sons is associated with no additional benefit. These findings support a constraint-based sex preference perspective, suggesting that recent Chinese fathers may value daughters more due to their perceived caregiving reliability and lower financial burden, challenging traditional son preference norms. This study contributes new evidence to global debates on parenthood and subjective well-being and offers insight into the shifting cultural landscape of Chinese family life.



## ***Theoretical Framework***

Life satisfaction is commonly defined as a cognitive evaluation of one's overall living conditions or quality of life (Diener et al. 1985). Understanding how becoming a parent influences life satisfaction and related aspects of subjective well-being has long intrigued social scientists. Classic theories suggest that parenthood, as a highly valued social role, ought to enrich identity and well-being; yet empirical findings have often shown lower life satisfaction among parents than nonparents, presenting a seeming paradox. To reconcile these patterns, researchers have proposed a cost–benefit framework in which the emotional rewards of children are counterbalanced by the stresses and sacrifices they bring. In particular, Nelson, Kushlev, and Lyubomirsky (2014) outline a “pains and pleasures” framework, or cost-benefit framework of parental well-being. This cost-benefit framework illustrates the well-being outcomes of parenthood as the consequences of two competing forces: parents are “unhappy” to the extent that they face more negative emotions, financial problems, sleep disruptions, and strained relationships, but they are “happy” to the extent that parenthood gives them greater meaning in life, basic need fulfillment, positive emotions, and enhanced social roles.

To be more specific, the cost-benefit framework links the life satisfaction question to the broader parenthood effect literature. Life satisfaction is determined by a number of labor market and health factors. As childbearing incurs childcare needs, which exaggerate work-family conflicts and affect parents' time use and living arrangements, labor market conditions and health factors often explain the “unhappy” or “costs” aspects of parenthood. On the one hand, a large number of literature has documented that around the world, childbirths predict lower wages and less labor market participation (Agüero and Marks 2011; England 2016; Killewald and Zhuo 2019), because pregnancy leads to unavoidable loss or stop of job experiences and mothers take

the primary responsibility of childrearing. Fathers, on the other hand, may receive a “fatherhood premium” – higher wages or increased labor market participation – after childbirths (Fallesen, Andersen, and Elwert 2024; Killewald 2013, 2013). Second, childbearing, particularly the first childbearing, leads to negative mental and physical shocks. Having a first child is related to increased risks of obesity and depression for both men and women (Metzger and Gracia 2025; Saxbe, Rossin-Slater, and Goldenberg 2018; Torche and Rauf 2021). Women tend to be more seriously impacted by childbearing, not only because of the physical impacts of pregnancy but also because of women taking sacrifice more leisure and sleep time to childcare (Musick, Meier, and Flood 2016; Saxbe et al. 2018). The job market impacts of parenthood also undermine subjective financial well-being (Zhou and Wang 2025), which could translate to loss of overall job satisfaction.

From the cost-benefit perspective, the benefits of parenthood on life satisfaction would manifest if we properly accounted for the cost pathways. In other words, the apparent negative effect of parenthood on life satisfaction can be explained by offsetting positive and negative influences. Empirical findings support this “offsetting hypothesis” in many Western contexts. An important research supporting the hypothesis, Pollmann-Schult (2014) reported after accounting for time and financial costs of childbearing, parenthood positively affects life satisfaction among German parents. Europe-wide comparative analysis shows that in countries with more work-time flexibility or pro-family policies, parenthood leads to fewer losses of subjective well-being or increases in subjective well-being, suggesting that weakened “cost” pathways improve the beneficial effects of parenthood (Glass, Simon, and Andersson 2016; Pollmann-Schult 2018; Preisner et al. 2020). An extension of the cost-benefit theory and offset hypothesis is the set point theory, which argues that the parenthood effects only temporarily improve life satisfaction, but

the positive effects would decline as children grow up. Following this view, Myrskylä and Margolis (2014) find life satisfaction increases in the years surrounding the birth of a first child, then gradually decreases back to pre-child levels in the subsequent years. It suggests that parents experience a peak of life satisfaction due to the meaningfulness of childbearing, but the positive effects are gradually offset by costs of parenthood. Similar patterns are reported in Russian and Swiss contexts as well (Mikucka 2016; Mikucka and Rizzi 2020).

Whereas studies taking a psychological perspective consider that benefits of parenthood are universal and stem from the meaningfulness of parenting experiences, a number of literature also stress the normative nature of the reward of parenthood. Kravdal (2014) emphasized that “taste-for-children”, or the degree to which parents believe that children will bring about happiness before they have children. Balbo and Arpino (2016) address that such beliefs depend on one’s internalized cultural norms: British mothers who have traditional family values – values that highlight the significance of parenthood to the overall meaning of life – have increased life satisfaction after childbirth, whereas mothers who have non-traditional values have stable life satisfaction before and after childbirth.

To sum up, existing research highlights that parenthood affects life satisfaction through its cost mechanism – financial and health shocks, its universal psychological rewards based on the meaningfulness of parent-child interaction, and its cultural-specific rewards based on the belief regarding the importance and meaningfulness of children to the overall life, as shown in Figure 1. This framework implies an important question in the East Asian context: how does parenthood affect parental life satisfaction in the East Asian context, a context with both low fertility and historical cultures of emphasizing the importance of children to a meaningful life? The next section will briefly address the importance of this question in China.

### *Parenthood and Subjective Wellbeing in China: Importance of Children's Sex*

Although a number of studies documented that parenthood in China leads to labor market and health penalties among Chinese women (Jiang and Yang 2022; Mu and Xie 2016; Yu and Cheng 2025; Yu and Xie 2018), the studies over life satisfaction are limited. Mu and Xie (2016) used the sex of the first child as an IV and reported that having a second child has no impacts on overall subjective well-being among Chinese mothers and fathers. Qian and Knoester (2015) used cross-sectional data and found that living with minor children is reported to lower levels of happiness. However, the limited body of literature has not fully taken into account the “offset” hypothesis. In China today, despite declining fertility rates, having at least one child is still considered an essential component of a “complete life” (Yao, Chan, and Chan 2018), suggesting psychological or normative rewards of parenthood in China. However, existing studies have not systematically examined whether, net of labor market and health consequences of parenthood, parenthood has residual positive effects on life satisfaction.

Another more important limitation is that the existing studies have not fully taken into account the importance of children's sex, which may significantly shape the normative reward of parenthood to life satisfaction. Specifically, we propose two competing hypotheses: the traditional sex preference hypothesis, and the constraint-based son preference. On the one hand, traditional Chinese culture highlights a preference toward sons, as sons are believed to carry family names, continue family lineages, and take the responsibilities of caring for older parents, whereas daughters are expected to “marry out” eventually, becoming members of spouses’ families and irrelevant to parental households (Das Gupta et al. 2003; Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011). These cultural norms highlight that having sons, instead of daughters, brings about normative rewards to parents.

A competing view to this tradition-oriented hypothesis is the constraint-based son preference hypothesis. Economists studying child sex preference in Western contexts argued that child sex preference depends on the rational calculation of costs and returns of childrearing rather than cultural traditions (Lundberg 2005). This view may be particularly important in the current China. Since 2010, the sex ratio at birth has been stably declining and the sex of the first child has been balanced (Jiang and Zhang 2021). Along with the balance of the sex ratio at birth, evidence also suggests that son preference is declining among younger generations (Tang and Hou 2024). Traditional values may no longer dominate childbearing decisions in recent parents. Instead, recent parents may exhibit preference toward daughters, instead of sons, for two reasons: first, for a rational view of childbearing, a key long-term return of childbearing is the care service from children when parents are old, and there has been a growing consensus among recent Chinese that daughters, instead of sons, are more reliable and predictable caregivers when parents are old (Ling 2017). Second, even today, Chinese marriage systems are still embedded into the patrilineal culture that expects men or groom's families to hold an expensive "white wedding," pay bride price to brides' families, and to take the larger share of the costs for the new couple's independent house or condo (Jiang, Zhang, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2015; Jin et al. 2024; Wan 2006). These practices link boys to high future expenditure, which may make boys less desirable than girls. Third, qualitative evidence highlights a rising preference for girls, at least among urban women, with the belief that raising girls is more emotionally rewarding than boys. If there is truly a constraint-based preference toward girls over sons, due to sons' long-term high costs and girls' short-term emotional and long-term caregiving returns, it could be expected that the normative rewards of girls to life satisfaction are greater than boys.

### *The present Study*

Based on the cost-benefit framework of the subjective wellbeing consequences of parenthood, the competing views on the child sex preference culture in current China, and the lack of literature on parenthood and wellbeing in China, this study proposes to examine how parenthood – the first and second child birth- influences subjective wellbeing in China today. Based on the cost-benefit framework (Pollmann-Schult 2014) and the culture that the Chinese children are essential component of a complete life, this paper first proposes to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (*offsetting hypothesis*): account for health and financial changes due to childbearing, childbearing has net positive effects on parental life satisfaction.

Second, based on competing views on child sex preference in China today, this paper proposes to examine the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a (*traditional sex preference hypothesis*): account for health and financial changes due to childbearing, having boys leads to higher positive changes on parental life satisfaction than having girls.

Hypothesis 2b (*constraint-based sex preference hypothesis*): account for health and financial changes due to childbearing, having girls leads to higher positive changes on parental life satisfaction than having boys.

This paper proposes to utilize longitudinal, national representative data to rigorously analyze the causal impacts of childbearing using fixed effect design. Findings of this research will substantially contribute to the theory and evidence of the normative awards of childbearing and enrich the comparative parenthood effect all over the world.

## ***Data and Design***

### *Data*

This study uses data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a nationally representative, longitudinal survey administered biennially by the Institute of Social Science Survey (ISSS) at Peking University. Initiated in 2010, the CFPS collects rich information on demographic, economic, health, and subjective well-being indicators for individuals and households across 25 provinces in China, covering over 95 percent of the population (Xie and Hu 2014). The survey employs multistage stratified probability sampling and targets approximately 16,000 households in each wave.

We use five waves of CFPS data (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022), selected for their consistent inclusion of variables necessary to assess both subjective life satisfaction and intermediate “cost” outcomes, including physical health, mental health, self-rated health, and family financial status. Analyses are restricted to adults aged 20 to 50.

We construct two analytic subsamples. The first-childbirth sample includes adults who had no children by the 2012 wave, appeared in at least two waves of the survey, and had at least one observation of life satisfaction prior to first childbirth. This yields a sample of 7,355 unique individuals contributing 23,293 person-wave observations. The second-childbirth sample includes adults who had only one child as of 2012 and similarly contributed at least one pre-birth observation with a valid life satisfaction measure. This sample consists of 14,876 individuals and 48,564 person-wave observations. These panel subsamples allow for the identification of within-person changes in life satisfaction across the transition to parenthood, separately for first and second births.

## *Measures*

The primary outcome is self-reported life satisfaction, measured on a five-point Likert scale in response to the question, “How satisfied are you with your life?” Responses range from 1 (“very unsatisfied”) to 5 (“very satisfied”) (Xie and Lu 2015).

The treatment variable is a time-varying categorical indicator for childbirth, constructed separately for first and second births. In each model, the reference category comprises person-wave observations prior to childbirth. We distinguish between the birth of a son and the birth of a daughter to assess potential heterogeneity by child sex. Thus, for first births, the categories include “no child,” “first-born son,” and “first-born daughter.” For second births, the categories include “no second child,” “second-born son,” and “second-born daughter.”

To capture health-related costs, we include three physical health indicators: (1) body mass index (BMI), calculated from self-reported height and weight; (2) self-rated health, assessed on a five-point scale from “poor” to “excellent”; and (3) the number of days ill in the past two weeks. Mental health is assessed using the eight-item version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale (CESD-8), which is available beginning in 2016 (Boey 1999). Higher CESD-8 scores indicate more severe depressive symptoms. Family financial conditions are measured using log-transformed per capita household income. Additional covariates include time-varying age, residential province, urban residence indicator, and hukou registration type (rural vs. non-rural).

## *Analytical Strategy*

We estimate the effects of childbirth on life satisfaction using individual-level two-way fixed effects (TWFE) regression models. Each model includes person fixed effects and wave (year) fixed effects to control for time-invariant individual characteristics and common time

shocks. The TWFE approach is equivalent to a difference-in-differences estimator in longitudinal settings under the parallel trends assumption (Imai and Kim 2021). We adjust for time-varying covariates, including age, province, urban residence, hukou status, BMI, self-rated health, CESD-8 scores, two-week illness, and per capita income. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. No survey weights are applied.

***Preliminary Results***

In this extended abstract, we present preliminary results of the estimated effects of first and second childbirths on women and men’s life satisfaction, adjusting for health and family financial shocks. For the purpose of simplicity, we do not present all coefficients, including coefficients of childbirths on health and family finance measures. They will be included in the eventual draft.

Figure 1. Coefficients of First Child’s Births on Men and Women’s Life Satisfaction.

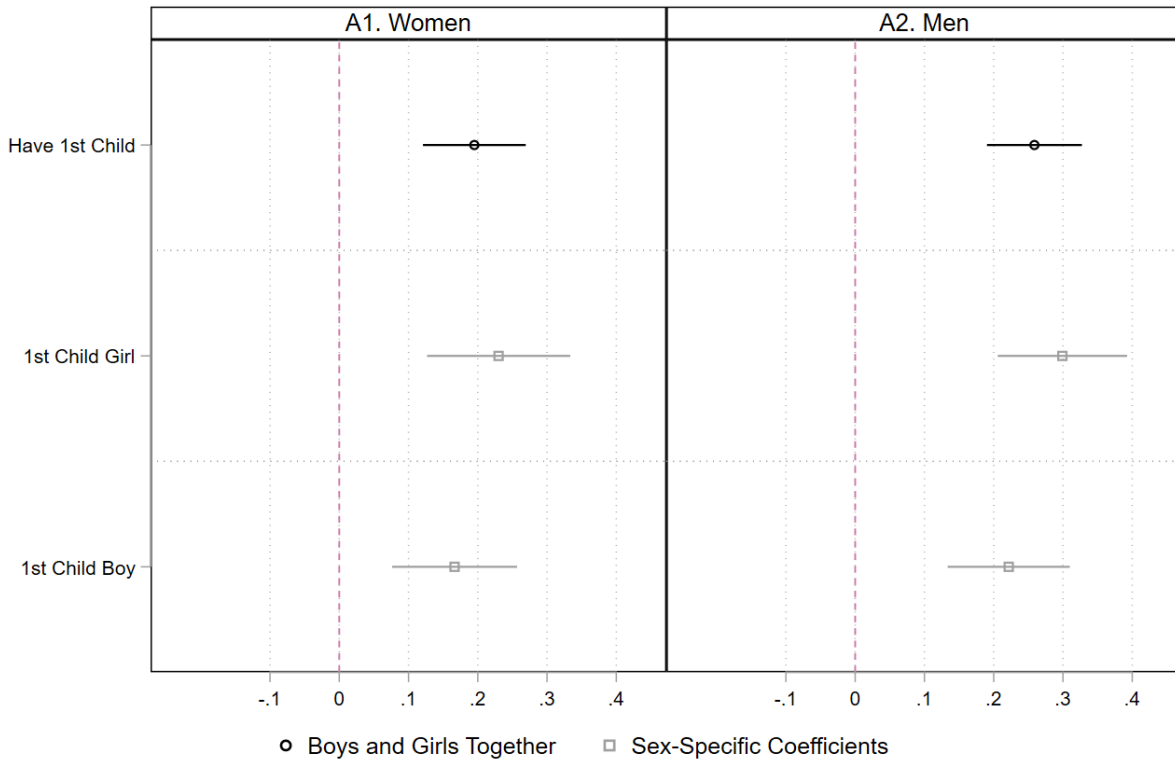


Figure 1 presents estimates of the effects of first childbirth on life satisfaction separately for women (Figure A1) and men (Figure A2). Across both groups, the transition to first-time parenthood is associated with a statistically significant increase in life satisfaction, supporting the “offset” hypothesis: while parenthood may introduce health and economic costs, its net effect remains positive. Disaggregated results by the sex of the first child reveal no evidence of differential effects. For women, the coefficients for having a son versus a daughter are nearly identical and statistically indistinguishable. Among men, the estimated effect of a first-born son appears slightly larger than that of a daughter, but the difference is not statistically significant ( $p = 0.202$ ). These findings suggest that first childbirth improves subjective well-being for both mothers and fathers, regardless of the child’s sex.

**Figure 2.** Coefficients of the Second childbirth and the Second Child and First Child Sex Composition on Men and Women’s Life Satisfaction.

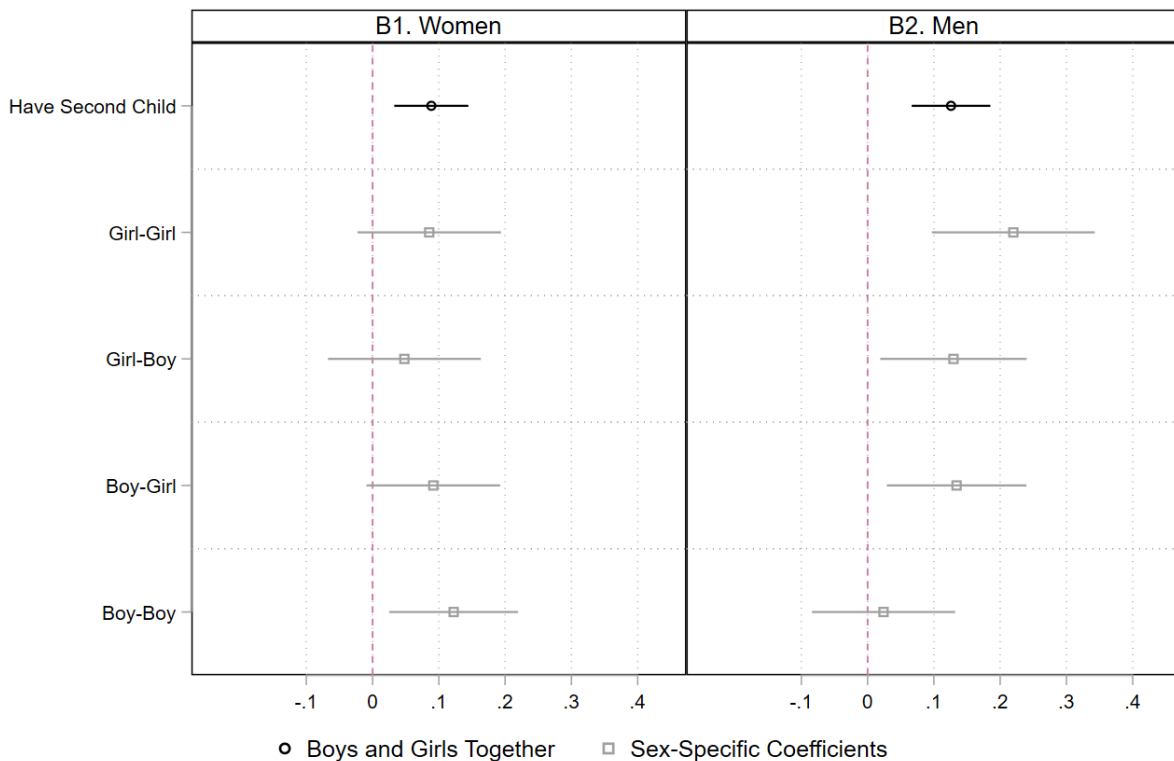


Figure 2 displays the effects of second childbirth on parental life satisfaction, with the reference category being individuals with only one child. The results show that having a second child significantly increases life satisfaction for both mothers and fathers, even after accounting for the first birth—further supporting the offset hypothesis. Among women, life satisfaction gains do not differ by the sex composition of children, indicating no evidence of sex-specific effects. In contrast, men’s responses vary meaningfully by child sex. Fathers who have two daughters exhibit the largest improvement in life satisfaction, followed by those with mixed-sex children (either girl-boy or boy-girl). In stark contrast, having two sons is associated with no change in life satisfaction. These patterns are consistent with a constraint-based interpretation of sex preference in contemporary China, suggesting that fathers may derive greater short-term emotional benefit from daughters than sons.

### ***Preliminary Conclusion and Next Steps***

Guided by a cost–benefit framework and situated in the evolving Chinese social context, this study investigates the sex-specific effects of childbearing on parental life satisfaction. Drawing on recent waves of CFPS data (2012–2022), we examine how first and second childbirths influence subjective well-being among Chinese adults, with particular attention to the sex of the child and birth order composition.

We find that both first and second childbirths are associated with significant increases in parental life satisfaction. These effects are robust across gender and are consistent with the “offset” hypothesis: despite the physical, financial, and social costs of childbearing, the net impact on subjective well-being is positive. Importantly, for first births, we detect no meaningful differences in life satisfaction based on the sex of the child for either mothers or fathers.

For second births, however, the effect depends on the sex composition of children. Fathers experience the greatest gains in life satisfaction when their second child is a daughter and the first child is also a girl, followed by mixed-sex sequences (first girl–second boy or first boy–second girl). In contrast, having two sons does not yield any additional improvement in well-being. Among mothers, life satisfaction does not vary significantly by the sex of the second child

These patterns are consistent with a constraint-based sex preference hypothesis, whereby parents' preferences reflect assessments of the economic and emotional costs and returns associated with sons and daughters. In contrast to traditional son preference, where boys are viewed as more desirable, the current findings suggest that contemporary Chinese fathers may derive greater satisfaction from raising daughters—possibly due to shifting cultural values, reduced patrilineal expectations, and the perceived financial burden of raising sons.

Moving forward, our next steps include adding more “costs” measures, such as a more comprehensive sets of health and family finance measures. We will also explore urban-rural differences in the sex-specific effects, as rural contexts also express more traditional sex preferences. We will also enrich our theoretical design and rigor of the methodological design in future drafts.

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