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Social class, intergenerational mobility, and desired number of children in China

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ABSTRACT

With more countries entering an era of low fertility, factors that may shape individuals' childbearing desires have been extensively explored. One's intergenerational social mobility experience, however, remains under-discussed. This paper examines this issue against the backdrop of China, in which the total fertility rate has rapidly declined to the lowest-low level in recent decades. Using pooled five-wave data from the Chinese General Social Survey from 2010 to 2017, we found a checkmark-shaped relationship between social class and fertility desire. Chinese farmers have the greatest desired number of children, manual workers have the lowest, and the two upper classes lie in the middle. In general, one's origin class and destination class play a similar role in shaping fertility desire, demonstrating the coexistence of socialization and acculturation processes. The gender-specific examination further suggests that, compared to women, men are more reluctant to change the fertility attitude learned from the origin class. Based on these findings, our study proposes a novel explanation of the decline in fertility desire in China and contributes to the literature on how social mobility experiences and gender ideology jointly construct fertility desire.

1. Introduction

In recent years, most industrialized countries have witnessed a lowered desire for children among their populations, which has caught the attention of social demographic researchers (Westoff 2010). To better understand the reasons behind this tide of low fertility desire, numerous studies have examined factors that might constrain people's desire for children. The constraints that have received significant attention primarily stem from the present circumstances individuals encounter in their childbearing age. For instance, they have discussed the effects of individual education level and income (Dribe and Smith 2020; Yu 2021), a couple's relative power differences (Thomson et al. 1990; Testa et al. 2014; Peng 2020), the support and preferences of grandparents (Ji et al. 2015; Kotte and Ludwig 2011; Peng 2020), and cultural and socioeconomic features of the local context (Jin et al. 2015; Anderson and Kohler 2013). However, one's fertility desire does not solely hinge upon current conditions, as previous experiences can also contribute to the nature of this desire. Intergenerational social mobility, which is moving from the class of one's parents to the class that one attains as an adult, is one of the most important experiences that people can have and is likely to generate and reshape one's fertility desire.

A few studies have attempted to link fertility desire with social class and intergenerational mobility. However, answers to three essential questions remain inconclusive. The first is the undetermined effect of social class on fertility desire. When people hold the

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same position in both origin and destination class, examining the effect of intergenerational mobility is equivalent to examining the effect of an unchanged social class. Previous studies have found that being a member of the educated upper class can increase one's need for quality rather than quantity of children and therefore encourage people to pursue their own careers by reducing the number of children they plan to have (Becker 1960; Dribe and Scalone 2014; Skirbekk 2008). However, sufficient socio-economic resources can also greatly increase one's likelihood of raising more children (Bao et al. 2017; Becker 1960; Dribe and Smith 2020; Malthus 1798 [1914]). Disentangling the seemingly conflicting effects of social class is, therefore, the first challenge that studies may encounter. The second question concerns people who have experienced intergenerational mobility. Attitudes about fertility are likely to be first developed in one's origin class and to receive further reshaping in the destination class that one obtains in adulthood. Classical discussions have agreed that both origin and destination classes may contribute to one's desire to have children (Blau 1956; Blau and Duncan 1967; Boyd 1973; Sobel 1985). However, few studies have demonstrated the exact relative importance of the two classes. The third question concerns gender heterogeneity. Gender disparity in the association between class and fertility desire and in the relative importance of the two classes has yet to be fully discussed in prior studies. Given the dissimilarities in socially defined roles in relation to childbearing, especially in patriarchal societies, men and women are very likely to show differences regarding the effect of social mobility on fertility desire. An observation of the gendered effects could contribute to a better understanding of the gendered reasons for low fertility desire. With this in mind, a closer examination that aims to answer these three questions is a necessity.

China offers a unique setting for such an examination because the country witnessed two interlocked processes at the turn of the 21st century: a rapid decline in fertility and a nationwide transition of class structure. The low total fertility rate was initially an outcome of China's family planning policy; nonetheless, it only recovered slightly for a short period of time and then further decreased after the enactment of the universal two-child policy on January 1, 2016 (Chen 2021; NBS 2021a). It seems that Chinese people have been losing interest in childbearing, even when the government has attempted to encourage them to have more babies over the past five years. The average desired number of children for Chinese people has decreased greatly from the replacement level in the mid-1980s to 1.8 in 2020 (Hou 2015). This has occurred simultaneously with large-scale changes in class structure since the beginning of the 1980s. A large number of rural surplus laborers left the land to seek employment after the implementation of the household contract responsibility system. The relaxation of the household registration system further attracted these labor forces to urban areas. The more developed capital market in urban areas and the expansion of higher education paved a pathway for people of middle and lower origin to move into the upper classes. A large proportion of Chinese people have experienced intergenerational social mobility, which is not frequently observed in other countries due to their relatively stable social structures (Li and Zhu 2017; Zhou and Xie 2019). Considering that the two processes have been interlocked in the past few decades, it is likely that the nationwide transition of class structure is causally related to the declining fertility desire of Chinese people, although this possibility has been largely ignored by previous studies. Taking advantage of the Chinese setting, this paper attempts to examine this issue from an individual perspective, specifically revealing how one's intergenerational mobility experience shapes fertility desire.

To achieve this purpose, this study employs the pooled cross-sectional data of the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) from 2010 to 2017. One's intergenerational social mobility experience is determined by the occupation-based social class of the father in the respondent's teenage years and that of the respondent's own social class in his or her adulthood. The proxy for fertility desire is the desired number of children reported by the respondent under a hypothetical situation without policy restrictions. Using the *Diagonal Reference Model (DRM)*, we explore the relationship between intergenerational mobility and fertility desire through the following three questions: *first, how is one's social class associated with one's desired number of children; second, for people who have experienced intergenerational mobility, to what extent do their origin class and destination class shape their desired number of children; and third, are the answers to the above two questions gender-specific?* Through a three-step examination, this study aims to fill the aforementioned research gaps and provide a novel explanation for the rapidly decreasing fertility rate in China.

2. Interlocked fertility decline and structure transition in China

In this chapter, we review the general fertility trend in China and its relation to the changing fertility desire of Chinese people. The fertility rate in China has experienced a rapid decline since the late 1970s. In the beginning, this decline was the outcome of a strict family planning policy that allowed each couple to have only one child.[1] According to The World Bank (2021), the total fertility rate in China decreased quickly from around 2.5 in the 1980s to 1.67 in 2015, w hich represents the policy's success but also indicates a risk of low fertility. To reverse this trend, the universal two-child policy, which encourages couples to have two children, was enacted at the start of 2016. However, the effect of this policy was short-lived, and the total fertility rate quickly began to decrease again (Chen 2021). The most recent census revealed that the fertility rate in 2020 was as low as 1.3, which indicates that China has entered the list of countries with the lowest-low total fertility rate (NBS 2021a). To strengthen the pro-birth policy, the Chinese government announced the universal three-child policy in the middle of 2021. However, the effectiveness of this new policy is still difficult to determine.

Low fertility desire is one of the most essential reasons for the seemingly unstoppable fertility decline. Chinese people seem to have culturally adapted to the one-child pattern (Zhang 2017), and they seem to be unenthusiastic about having multiple children considering the numerous difficulties that they are likely to face in the process of childbearing and childrearing. According to a survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, Chinese women in their reproductive ages would like to have an average of 1.8 children

[1] Although the one-child policy was a national policy, it should be noted that the policy varied across regions, as the government stressed the importance of adjusting the policy at local levels to suit regional socioeconomic and cultural conditions (Short and Zhai 1998). The birth control regulation was relatively weaker in rural areas and ethnic autonomous regions.

(SCIO 2021). When further examining the statistics of subgroups, the situation seems to be much worse. People born after 1990, who are of the best childbearing age, only held an average of 1.7 as their ideal number of children in 2018, and as high as 28% of this cohort held the single child ideal (Yu 2021). Even worse, the overall fertility desire in China is lower than that of neighboring countries that have already been characterized by low fertility, such as South Korea and Japan. Based on data from the World Value Survey for 1995–2000, the average ideal number of children for the Chinese population (except Taiwan) was 1.83. To compare, the corresponding statistics for Japan and South Korea were 2.2 and 2.4, both of which were moderately above the replacement level (Wu 2020). Some studies have considered the 1.8 average for the ideal number of children to be relatively high (Jin 2014). However, this argument may be overly optimistic, as an individual's reported fertility desire is typically larger than the number of children they plan to have and larger again than the number of children they actually achieve (Bongaarts 2001; Harknett and Hartnett 2014). With this in mind, even a moderate fertility desire could lead to a very low number of childbirths. Furthermore, low fertility desire may create its own momentum, causing the small family ideal to be adopted by future generations and thus making it difficult for this trend to be changed by pro-natalist policies (Goldstein et al. 2003; Sobotka 2009). In this sense, the low fertility desire among the Chinese people and the construction of such a desire as an overall trend requires serious attention.

Fertility desire, as a social attitude, is often first created through socialization in one's origin class and later reshaped by the family norms of the destination class. Such a construction process can be easily observed in Chinese society. The country's social structure transition over the past few decades has driven large-scale intergenerational mobility, which has coincided with the aforementioned decline in fertility desire. The economic reform that began at the end of the 1970s has converted the centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy, causing achieved attributes to play a more determinant role in one's upward mobility and thus a gradual decline in the effect of ascribed attributes (Nee 1989). An individual's chance of achieving upward mobility is, therefore, significantly improved (Li and Zhu 2017). According to the occupational structure shown in the census data and 1% population sample survey data from 1982 to 2015,[2] the percentage of farmers in China decreased by half (from 72% to 36%) in this period. In contrast, the percentage of salesmen and servicers increased substantially from 4% to 26%, and that of managers and professionals also increased by about 4%. The driving forces behind such a massive transition are straightforward. The primary upwardly mobile group consists of rural residents migrating to cities for manual work, which is consistent with the implementation of the household contract responsibility system and the relaxation of the household registration system (the *Hukou* system). Rural residents are no longer constrained to land and farming-related issues. The other major upwardly mobile group has benefited from the expansion of higher education at the end of the 20th century, allowing them to break into the upper classes as professionals and managers. Scholars have calculated the rate of intergenerational mobility in China and found it to be relatively high when compared to other industrial societies (Li et al. 2018; Li and Zhu 2017; Zhou and Xie 2019). Literature also suggests that experiencing social mobility is likely to shape one's social beliefs and attitudes (Gugushvili et al. 2020; Li and Wang 2021;Schuck and Shore 2019; Tolsma et al. 2009; Van Eijck 1999; Weakliem 1992; Wilson et al. 2022). In this sense, it can be expected that the fertility desire of Chinese people might be closely related to their social mobility experiences. The present paper therefore investigates how an individual's fertility desire is constructed during the process of moving from one class to another.

3. Fertility desire and class

Among individuals who have not experienced intergenerational mobility, fertility desire is constructed in the class they share with the previous generation. Hence, we first explore the association between social class and fertility desire. Existing studies have paid great attention to this association; however, they have not reached a firm conclusion. In Malthus's classic essay on the principle of population (1798 [1914]), he initially proposed a positive correlation between income and family size because sufficient economic resources tend to encourage people to get married at a younger age, enjoy a longer reproductive period, and ultimately have more children. This proposition was later echoed by Becker, whose ideas were developed from an economic framework (1960). In Becker's view, a child can be seen as a durable consumption good that provides parents with psychic income repeatedly and constantly. To possess this good, parents must bear a large financial burden. This may be difficult for lower-class parents, whereas upper-class parents can meet such marital needs more easily. Although the two views adopt distinct mechanisms, they both lend support to the argument that higher-class people are likely to hold a stronger fertility desire and thus have a larger family size. Empirical evidence for this argument has been documented in previous studies (Hull and Hull 1977; Stys 1957; Wrong 1958). However, researchers have found that the quantity elasticity brought about by economic resources has become smaller with the process of modernization (Becker 1960) and that the positive correlation between class and fertility can hardly persist after the onset of fertility decline (Dribe and Scalone 2014; Skirbekk 2008). The small family ideal was first adopted by the upper classes and later diffused to the lower social classes (Dribe et al. 2017; Haines 1989). This caused a shift from a positive to a negative class-fertility relationship. The small family ideal has two sources. First, in the first demographic transition, people began to link social mobility with fertility. Parents' strong willingness for children to move upward inspired the concept of a child-centered family (Van de Kaa 1987). The number of children shrank to ensure that parents could concentrate family resources and achieve better child quality (Becker 1960). Dumont's "social capillarity" metaphor (Béjin 1989) echoes this point of view. The other source of the small family ideal is the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2011), wherein ideologies such as individualism and gender equality became prevalent. As a result, greater weight has been attached to an individual's self-realization than to his or her conformity to traditional social expectations for family formation and childbearing.

[2] The figure of occupational structure from 1982 to 2015 is not shown in this paper for the sake of brevity, but it is available upon request.

In the context of China, the desire for a small family due to the pursuit of high-quality children may be widespread, while the preference for a small family resulting from individualism may only be present in developed regions where the second demographic transition is on the rise. In this sense, the class-fertility desire association in China might be negative, as the literature suggests. Still, we should not overlook the resource advantage of the upper classes. The high cost of childrearing has become the predominant inhibiting factor of fertility in China today, with upper classes being more able to afford multiple children (Bao et al. 2017; Zhu and Hong 2021). Following this line of thinking, we hypothesize that the association between class and fertility desire in China tends to be non-linear, with the upper and lower classes having a stronger desire and the classes in the middle having a weaker desire. Empirical evidence for such a U-shaped curve has been documented in prior studies focused on China (Zhao 2019; Wu 2020). *Hypothesis 1* is listed below:

- Hypothesis 1: People from higher- and lower-class positions are prone to having a higher fertility desire, while people from the class in the middle are reluctant to have children.

4. Fertility desire and mobility: socialization vs. acculturation

When people experience intergenerational social mobility, it is possible that their fertility desires are constructed through two processes: socialization in the origin social class and acculturation in the social class obtained in adulthood. The framework in which the effects of the origin class and destination class are additive has been widely accepted in studies exploring how intergenerational mobility shapes social behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes (Gugushvili et al. 2020; Li and Wang 2021; Schuck and Shore 2019; Tolsma et al. 2009; Van Eijck 1999; Weakliem 1992; Wilson et al. 2022). Fertility desire, as a social attitude in one's lifetime, can fit into this framework as well.

Some studies posit that the prevailing fertility patterns of one's social origin determine his or her desire for children. For example, studies have found strong empirical evidence for the transmission of fertility patterns across generations (Booth and Kee 2009; Murphy and Wang 2001; Kotte and Ludwig 2011). The more children an individual's parents have, the more children the individual is likely to want and to finally have. Migration studies have also captured the significance of fertility patterns in the origin context, which can serve as additional evidence. For example, they found that the average number of children born to immigrant women is positively related to the number of children born to women in the home country, regardless of the year since immigration (Fernández and Fogli 2009; Marcén et al. 2018). The socialization process provides an explanation for the decisive role of social origin, as fertility patterns internalized during one's socialization can be resistant to change. Other studies have insisted that although fertility desire is first formed in one's social class, it can be further modified throughout one's lifetime. Mobile individuals enter a new class after their transition into adulthood, at which point they desire acceptance from their destination class (Blau 1956). In accordance with this need for acceptance, mobile individuals may seek to learn the prevailing behavior patterns in the destination class, which include the pattern of fertility (Bernardi 2003). By adopting these new fertility norms, individuals may increase their likelihood of obtaining membership in the destination class and avoid covert punishments resulting from different ways of conducting daily life (Lois and Becker 2014). Given that few studies have explored the destination class effect on fertility, this study attempts to find some supporting evidence from migration studies. For example, Kahn (1994) found evidence for the gradual convergence of fertility expectations and real fertility rates between immigrants and natives in European countries, which lends credibility to the importance of the acculturation process. Some studies have adopted both approaches by suggesting that social origin and destination have equal weight in forming fertility desires. These studies emerged in the second half of the 20th century and found that mobile individuals' fertility is intermediate between that in their origin class and that in their destination class (Blau 1956; Blau and Duncan 1967; Boyd 1973; Sobel 1985).

In the Chinese context, we expect the effect of intergenerational mobility to be characterized by a much stronger effect of social origin. Apart from its role in socialization, the origin class of Chinese people is likely to exert a long-term impact on fertility desire after an individual steps into adulthood and obtains his or her own social class status. This is because having a child in the Chinese context is seldom an issue that can be solely decided by the younger generation, as the previous generation is also a stakeholder in childbirth and childrearing (Ji et al. 2015; Peng 2020). A realistic reason for this is that members of the younger generation in the current Chinese society typically need support, either financial or care-related, from their parents. From a cultural perspective, filial piety, as one of the central values of the patriarchal Chinese family system, also requires the younger generation to fulfill the preferences of the previous generation. To include different possibilities, we propose three hypotheses (*Hypothesis 2.1 to 2.3*) and expect that the origin class will be of greater importance in shaping fertility desire in the Chinese context; that is, *Hypothesis 2.1* is more likely to be supported.

Furthermore, we extend the previously mentioned framework by suggesting that the relative importance of the social origin and destination class effect can be reshaped by the direction of intergenerational mobility. Upwardly mobile and downwardly mobile individuals may experience varying degrees of acculturation, leading to different contributions of their social destination on fertility desires. In China, given most individuals have experienced upward mobility, it is reasonable to suspect that downwardly mobile Chinese may exhibit unique characteristics and display different patterns regarding fertility desires compared to upwardly mobile individuals. We propose *Hypothesis 3* to consider this variation.

- Hypothesis 2.1: People's desired number of children is predominantly influenced by the social norms in their origin class.
- Hypothesis 2.2: People's desired number of children is predominantly influenced by the social norms in their destination class.
- Hypothesis 2.3: The origin class and destination class share the same weight in shaping fertility desire.
- Hypothesis 3: The relative importance of origin class and destination class in shaping fertility desire varies according to the direction of intergenerational mobility.

5. The role of gender ideology

Considering the deep-rooted disparity between the roles of the mother and father in childbearing, the association between fertility desire and social class is likely to vary by gender. Some prior studies have suggested that a higher social class is associated with lower fertility desire for women but higher fertility desire for men. For example, Kravdal and Rindfuss (2008) examined Norwegian data from 1940 to 1964 and found that better-educated women are more likely to have later first births or remain childless, while the opposite holds true for men. Studies using more recent data in other countries have also drawn similar conclusions (Fieder et al. 2005; Jackson 1995; Lim 2021), although these studies have employed different proxies of social class, such as education, income, and occupation. These studies attribute the gender disparity to the work-family conflicts faced by highly educated women. Nevertheless, not all empirical evidence lends support to the gender disparity described above. Using data on individuals clustered in 27 European countries, Testa et al. (2014) uncovered a positive association between women's education and their lifetime fertility intentions. Other studies have echoed Testa's finding by suggesting that this positive association holds true for both men and women (Dribe and Smith 2020). McDonald's gender equity theory (2000) provides an explanation for the unobserved gender disparity. Highly educated women are more likely to have an equal partnership at home and to achieve gender equality in the labor market, which jointly assist them in balancing work and mothering roles. Fertility desires are therefore higher for these women. When it comes to the Chinese situation, the aforementioned gender disparity is likely to be observed because concurrent gender equality in the domestic and institutional spheres has not yet been achieved in the country. In this line of thinking, we propose *Hypothesis 4.1* as described below.

Fewer studies have discussed how the relationship between intergenerational mobility and fertility desire differs for men and women. Evidence from related studies suggests that men typically follow traditional gender ideologies and family values more persistently than women, even if they have experienced upward mobility (Kravdal and Rindfuss 2008). On the contrary, women's attitudes toward gender roles are predominantly shaped by the social norms of their destination class rather than their origin class (Li and Wang 2021). When women move upward in the social scale, they tend to take a more active role in integrating into a gender-equal context. Such a gender disparity tends to be more remarkable in China due to its nature as a patriarchal society (Du et al. 2021). Men might be more likely than women to be influenced by their origin class because it is men who take the primary responsibility of carrying on the family name (Xu 2021), and they therefore bear great fertility pressure from previous generations. We propose *Hypothesis 4.2* based on this discussion.

- Hypothesis 4.1: The relationship between social class and fertility desire tends to differ between men and women.
- Hypothesis 4.2: The relative importance of origin class and destination class in determining fertility desire tends to be gendered. Men are more likely to be influenced by their origin class, while women are more likely to be influenced by their destination class.

6. Data and methods

6.1. Data

This study draws on pooled cross-sectional data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). This nationally representative survey is conducted by the sociology department of the Renmin University of China on an annual or biennial basis. The same implementing institution and consistent survey design ensure comparability among multiple waves (Bian and Li 2012). This survey offers sufficient information to examine the relationship between class mobility and fertility preferences in contemporary China. It collects data on the social-economic characteristics of respondents as well as those of the generation before them in each wave, and questions pertaining to respondents' desired number of children have been asked since 2010 (except for 2011). For this study, we pooled data from five waves of the CGSS (2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2017) for analysis to make full use of the repeatedly collected information on fertility preferences. Given that fertility decision-making and childbearing behaviors seldom take place out of wedlock in China (Xie 2013), we confined the sample to married respondents. We also restricted the age of the respondents and age of their spouses. The lower bound of age is the youngest legal age for marriage in China, which is 22 for men and 20 for women. The upper bound of age for women is set to be the maximum childbearing age of 49, and the upper bound for men is age 59, when they are about to retire. An eligible sample of 24,132 individuals was found at this stage.

6.2. Variables

6.2.1. Dependent variable

Fertility desire is the dependent variable in this study, and we used the desired number of children reported by respondents in a hypothetical situation as the proxy of desire. CGSS asked the following question: "Without considering the policy restriction, how many children do you like to have?" The numbers reported by respondents were considered to be the desired number of children. This measure has, at least, two advantages. First, the desired number of children outperforms the ideal number of children because it reflects one's personal preference for childbearing, whereas the latter is more closely related to the number of children required by social norms (Wu 2020). Secondly, the hypothetical situation presented in the survey questions helps to mitigate the influence of policy

on fertility desires. Measuring fertility desires under policy restrictions can be challenging. However, assuming the absence of policy restrictions helps ensure that the data reflects the true fertility desires of Chinese people. Additionally, it enables the comparison of fertility desires among respondents in different regions and time periods, given the significant variation of family planning policies across regions and time. We, therefore, employed the desired number of children in a hypothetical situation as the dependent variable.[3]

6.2.3. Independent variables

Class positions—both origin and destination—are the key independent variables in this study. As a fundamental variable in research on social stratification and mobility, class reflects an individual's comprehensive socioeconomic achievement in society as well as his or her relationships with other classes. In this study, social class is measured with information on occupation and employment status. Destination class is measured with one's current job or one's latest job if information on the current job is missing. Origin class is generated from the father's job when the respondent was 14 years old. The 11-category EGP class schema[4] (Erikson et al. 1979; Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996) is applied when transforming occupation categories into classes. Because EGP classes are not strictly arranged in a hierarchical order, we collapsed the 11-category class variable into four categories to reasonably define the direction of social mobility (Zhao et al. 2017; Chen 2018). The four categories include the managerial-professional class (EGP classes I and II, also called the service class or salariats), intermediate class (EGP classes IIIa, IIIb, IVa, and IVb, including routine non-manual occupations and people who are self-employed), manual workers (EGP classes V, VI, and VIIa, including foremen and skilled and unskilled manual workers), and farmers (EGP classes IVc and VIIb).[5]

7.2.2.1. Control variables. Control variables include individual socio-demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, migration status, possession of children, and health condition. Because the family planning policy has been more rigid for employees of the government or state-owned enterprises and for communist party members, meaning that these people are more likely to have lower fertility desires, we included two dummy variables to control for their effects. Because the childbearing process is subject to the involvement of both members of a couple, the spouse's class position was also controlled in the statistical analysis. A dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was surveyed after 2016, the year in which the universal two-child policy was adopted to encourage childbearing, was included as well. After adopting list-wise deletion, 20,088 cases were included for analysis, of which 9819 are male and 10,269 are female. We also applied the multiple imputation approach in sensitivity analyses to test whether the missing data could lead to biased results.

6.4. Analytic strategy

To examine the effect of intergenerational mobility on individuals' desired number of children, the diagonal reference model (DRM) is employed in this study. Among the traditional methods of estimating the effects of social mobility (i.e., the linear addictive approach, the square additive approach, and the diamond additive approach), none can handle the problem of linear dependence among origin, destination, and mobility (Blalock 1966; Duncan 1966; Hope 1971, 1975). This problem remained unaddressed until Sobel's proposal of the DRM in the 1980s (Sobel 1981, 1985). By disentangling the distinct effects of two dyadic characteristics and their differences, this method solves the identification problem and enables a comparison between the impacts of social origin and destination. As such, DRM has been widely applied to research on the social consequences of intergenerational and intragenerational mobility and has been extended to related fields such as assortative mating, status inconsistency, and so on (Chen 2018; Zang and Bardo 2019; Wilson et al. 2022).

The principle of DRM is as follows: The method first considers the estimated effects of "core members" with immobile class positions (diagonal cells in the mobility table) as the primary referents for mobile individuals (off-diagonal cells). This practice is reasonable because class-immobile individuals maintain the solid attributes of a certain class and make up the core of the group (De Graaf, Nieuwbeerta, and Heath 1995). As shown in Fig. 1, each mobile cell has two referents—immobile members of the origin class and those of the destination class. Next, the expected value of the desired number of children can be expressed by the weighted combination of the main effects of both origin and destination (diagonal effects), with the sum of the two weights constrained to 1. Therefore, the baseline model of the DRM in this paper can be represented as follows:

$$Y_{ijk} = p\mu_{ii} + q\mu_{jj} + \varepsilon_{ijk} \tag{1}$$

with Y_{ijk} being the dependent variable, which refers to the desired number of children for k's observation of origin class i and destination class j, and μ_{ii} and μ_{jj} denoting row effect and column effect, which indicate the estimated mean level of desired number of children for non-mobile origin and destination class respectively in this study. Therefore, p and q respectively measure the relative weight of origin class and destination class. Moreover, p and q lie in the interval [0, 1], and $p + q = 1$. In this line of thought, the

[3] Desired number of children greater than 5 (around 0.3% of the sample) was recoded as 5 to reduce the influence of extreme values.

[4] EGP class schema uses occupation categories and employment status to divide classes. It was firstly proposed by Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero in 1979, and later became one of the most widely used schema of class classification.

[5] Considering the high proportion of farmers in China as well as their traditional family ideologies, we considered farmers a separate class rather than combining them with manual workers as some prior studies have done (Zhao et al., 2017).

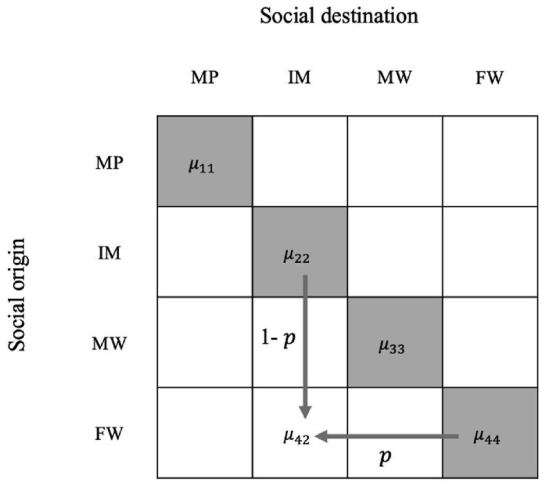

Fig. 1. Intuition of the diagonal reference model
Note: For the abbreviation of classes, MP = Managerial-professional Class, IM=Intermediate Class, MW = Manual Workers, FM=Farmers.

extended model with statistical control X takes the following form:

$$Y_{ijk} = p\mu_{ii} + q\mu_{jj} + \sum \beta_m X + \varepsilon_{ijk} \tag{2}$$

Model 2 displays the relative importance of social origin and destination for mobile individuals after partialing out the influence of covariates. It should be noted that the above two models both assume that the origin (or destination) class has the same weight for individuals who experience different types of mobility. To further examine if there is a significant difference in relative weights for upwardly mobile and downwardly mobile individuals, we specify the following functional form of the interactive model:

$$Y_{ijk} = \left(p + \Delta_{upward}\right)\mu_{ii} + \left(q - \Delta_{upward}\right)\mu_{jj} + \sum \beta_m X + \varepsilon_{ijk} \tag{3}$$

where $\Delta_{upward} = 0$ if the origin class is lower than the destination class. In other words, Model 3 allows the weights of origin and destination class to vary across mobility types, with the weight of origin class p for downwardly mobile individuals and $p+ \Delta_{upward}$ for

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for selective variables.

	Categories	Mean/Percentage	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Desired number of children		1.882	0.666	0	5
Gender	Women	49.0%	0.500		
	Men (=1)	51.0%	0.500		
Age		39.082	7.771	20	59
Ethnicity	Han	90.9%	0.288		
	Ethnic minorities (=1)	9.1%	0.288		
Health condition	not healthy	9.9%	0.299		
	healthy (=1)	90.1%	0.299		
Migrate status	Local	86.6%	0.340		
	Migrant (=1)	13.4%	0.340		
Have Children	None	5.6%	0.230		
	At least one (=1)	94.4%	0.230		
Party membership	No	90.2%	0.297		
	Yes (=1)	9.8%	0.297		
Danwei	Non-public sector	81.4%	0.389		
	Public sector (=1)	18.6%	0.389		
Spouse class	Managerial-professional	14.5%	0.352		
	Intermediate	21.4%	0.410		
	Manual worker	26.0%	0.439		
	Farmer	23.6%	0.425		
	Jobless/Retired	14.4%	0.351		
Interview year	2015 and before	82.6%	0.379		
	2017 (=1)	17.4%	0.379		
Region	East	35.5%	0.479		
	Northeast	12.5%	0.330		
	Middle	24.9%	0.432		
	West	27.1%	0.445		

the upwardly mobile group.

7. Results

7.1. Descriptive results

Table 1 documents the descriptive statistics for the dependent and control variables involved in this paper. The mean value of the desired number of children is 1.88, which is slightly larger than the values of fertility desire found in prior studies (Hou 2015; Wu 2020) but still lower than the replacement level. Ethnic minorities, the group entitled to a privilege policy of family planning, account for 9.1% of the whole sample, which is very close to the data from the 2020 census (8.9%). In addition, 94.4% of respondents have at least one child, reflecting the family norm of having children in modern China.

In Table 2, respondents are cross-classified in a contingency mobility table by origin class and destination class. The values in the table show the average desired number of children for each mobility status, with the number of observations in brackets. The sample distribution across cells shows that almost half of the respondents (48.5%) are in a class position higher than that of the previous generation (bottom left cells in the table), with around three quarters being the descendants of farmers. In contrast, only a fraction of the respondents (12.0%) experienced downward mobility (top right cells). This result indicates a prevailing trend of upward mobility in contemporary China, especially for those of farming origin. For the desired number of children, the shaded diagonal cells represent the mean value for immobile individuals of different class positions, showing that immobile farmers report the highest desired number of children (1.988), immobile manual workers report the lowest number (1.750), and the other two immobile groups report numbers that are in between. It is worth noting that the mean level of desired family size for immobile farmers is strikingly higher than that in other stable classes (1.988 vs. 1.815 and below), which suggests that while farmers' desired number of children has declined below the replacement level, this group still holds a more traditional concept of childbearing compared to other classes. While requiring more rigorous statistical analyses, the descriptive results for intergenerational immobile classes reaffirm prior findings of a non-linear relationship between class position and fertility preferences (Zhao 2019; Wu 2020). For individuals who have experienced intergenerational mobility, most of the mean values are located between the row and column diagonal cells they are affiliated with, indicating that the desired family size may be influenced by both origin and destination classes. This result supports the application of the DRM approach to capturing the relative shaping power of the two classes. The mobility table neither shows the relative importance of the effects of origin and destination classes nor partials out the effects of confounders. As such, it is necessary to examine the model results based on the DRM.

7.2. Model results

7.2.1. Full sample analyses

Table 3 reports the results of the baseline model, extended model, and interactive model for the full-sample data. The diagonal effect shows the main effects of immobile classes on the desired number of children by taking the managerial-professional class as the reference. All three models suggest that individuals in the farming class whose fathers were also farmers have the largest desired number of children, and those who maintain their position of origin as manual workers show the lowest desire to have more children. A gap of around 0.25 between the two immobile classes was found in the baseline model, and this gap becomes 0.19 after canceling out the effects of covariates in the extended model. Individuals who stay in managerial-professional and intermediate classes hold a moderate desire to have children, with subtle differences from each other. The relative size of diagonal effects supports *Hypothesis* 1 that the relationship between class and desired family size is not linear: people from immobile higher-class positions (managerial-professional and intermediate class) and lower-class position (farmers) hold a stronger fertility desire, while people from the immobile manual class hold a weaker desire. While this result resembles some previous findings of a U-shaped curve in China (Liu and Liu 2020; Zhao 2019), the discovery of a more salient fertility desire among farmers in our findings alters the relationship to be a check-mark shape rather than a standard U shape. Against the background of fertility decline in China, a stronger desire for multiple children among farmers implies their much stronger adherence to traditional family norms compared to other classes. This result echoes prior research suggesting that fertility desire has fallen faster in urban areas than in rural areas in China (Lavely and Freedman 1990; Skinner et al. 2000). Passing down cultivated land to descendants and obtaining a larger labor force for farming might no longer be major driving forces for rural couples to have multiple children in modern China. However, they still have a great need for children to provide security in their old age and to carry on ancestral rites (Harrell et al. 2011).

The diagonal results only apply to the immobile group that maintained their class positions. For the mobile group, the point estimates of weights represent the relative influence of the origin and destination classes. The baseline model and extended model show that the weights of both origin and destination classes are significant and that the two weights are quite close to each other (0.515 vs. 0.485 and 0.514 vs. 0.486). This implies that both social origin and destination exert a significant influence on the desired number of children for individuals who have experienced social mobility in China and that the magnitudes of their influence are similar. *Hypothesis 2.3* is supported by the above finding, whereas the dominance of the effect of the origin or destination, as proposed by *Hypotheses 2.1* and *2.2,* is not corroborated.

We take this one step further by examining whether mobility direction could moderate the relative weights using the interactive model. An insignificant interactive term (P value = 0.270) can be observed, which implies that the relative importance of origin class and destination class in shaping fertility desire remains the same for both upwardly mobile and downwardly mobile individuals, with other things being equal. Furthermore, the value of the Akaike information criterion (AIC) for the interactive model is larger than that

Table 2
Social origin, destination and average desired number of children.

DestinationOrigin	**Managerial-professional**	**Intermediate class**	**Manual workers**	Farmers	Total
Managerial-professional	1.815	1.818	1.785	1.931	1.823
	(902)	(790)	(468)	(281)	(2441)
Intermediate class	1.844	1.799	1.834	1.980	1.837
	(526)	(891)	(470)	(209)	(2096)
Manual worker	1.722	1.733	1.750	1.963	1.752
	(601)	(1093)	(973)	(199)	(2866)
Farmer	1.891	1.908	1.876	1.988	1.930
	(1331)	(2868)	(3349)	(5137)	(12,685)
Total	1.833	1.844	1.841	1.984	1.882
	(3360)	(5642)	(5260)	(5826)	(20,088)

Note: the average desired numbers of children are weighted; values within parentheses are numbers of observations.

of the extended model, which suggests that the extended model is favored over the interactive model. We are therefore able to conclude that there is no significant difference between the two types of mobile groups regarding the weights of origin and destination classes. As such, *Hypothesis 3* is not supported.

The coefficients of the control variables show how a series of socioeconomic and demographic factors shape one's fertility desire. Individuals who are male, older, migrants, employees in the private sector, living in the central and western regions, or married to a farmer spouse are more likely to hold a stronger desire to have more children. These results are largely consistent with previous studies (He et al. 2019; Zhou and Guo 2020). In the interest of brevity, the interpretation of covariates is not detailed here.

7.2.2. Gender-specific analyses

Drawing on prior research on gender disparities in fertility attitudes (e.g., Kravdal and Rindfuss 2008), we also conducted sub-sample analyses to examine the gender-specific effect of intergenerational mobility on fertility desire. The results are reported in Table 4 and Fig. 2.

In general, men hold a stronger desire to have more children than women, as the coefficient of constant for the male sample is greater than that of the female sample (1.651 vs. 1.450 in extended models, with the former value being significantly greater than the latter at 99% confidence level in a one-tailed test).[6] The association pattern between class and fertility desire found in the female and male subsamples is roughly consistent with that observed in the whole sample. Nevertheless, a subtle gender difference can be found (as shown in Fig. 2): Men in the intermediate class hold a slightly greater desired number of children than those in the managerial-professional class, but the opposite is true for women. This pattern is not in agreement with prior findings on the positive relationship between social status and fertility desire, especially for men. The difference may be because that the status we focus on is occupation-based class rather than education or income, and the outcome variable we are interested in is fertility desire rather than behavior. Additionally, it is pertinent to note that female farmers hold a stronger desire to bear more children relative to other classes within their gender. This difference implies that in the event that both genders share the same mobility trajectory, upwardly mobile females of farming origin are more likely to face a larger gap between origin class and destination class in terms of fertility desire.

The relative weights of origin and destination classes for individuals who have experienced intergenerational mobility are different for men and women. The parameter estimates under the extended model indicate that for men, social origin has a greater weight than destination class in determining the desired number of children (0.616 vs. 0.384); for women, destination class exerts a relatively greater influence than origin class (0.586 vs. 0.414). The weight of the origin class for men is significantly greater than that for women at a 95% confidence level in a one-tailed test (0.616 vs. 0.414, p-value = 0.042), as is the weight of the destination class (0.384 vs. 0.586, p-value = 0.042). The divergent pattern by gender supports *Hypothesis 4.2*, which expects that social origin and destination class exert an uneven impact on intergenerationally mobile men and women. The traditional cultural norm that men are responsible for carrying on the family lineage can partially explain the anchoring effect of social origin regarding their desired number of children (Xu 2021). In contrast, the desired family size for women is more responsive to current socioeconomic constraints as well as the new cultural norm of their destination class, which echoes previous findings that women's gender ideology is affected more by destination class in China (Li and Wang 2021). This result of gender disparity in fertility desire is also consistent with Billingsley et al.'s finding for Sweden, although their study is based on intragenerational rather than intergenerational mobility (Billingsley et al. 2018). In addition, an interactive effect of mobility type on the weights of origin and destination classes is examined by gender sub-groups in our study. The results of the interactive model also vary by gender, with similar relative weights found for upwardly and downwardly mobile men but a marginally significant difference observed in mobile women (greater than 0 at 95% confidence level in a one-tailed test, p-value = 0.027). Fig. 3 illustrates that for downwardly mobile women, the desired number of children is predominantly determined by their destination class, while for upwardly mobile women, the weight of destination is just slightly higher than 0.5. This may be related to the fact that downwardly mobile women have less power to resist pressure from their class peers, spouses, and family-in-laws in terms of fertility intention (Lois and Becker 2014).

[6] The comparison of coefficients between samples follows the approach of Clogg et al. (1995), and the one-tailed test was applied to determine the direction of the difference. The same is true hereinafter.

Table 3
Diagonal reference models for estimating the intergenerational social mobility effect on desired number of children.

	Baseline Model	Extended Model	Interactive Model
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)			
Intermediate class	0.005	0.008	0.004
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Manual workers	−0.067 **	−0.069 **	−0.069 **
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Farmers	0.184 ***	0.123 ***	0.120 ***
	(0.018)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Weight			
Original class (p)	0.515***	0.514***	0.351*
	(0.040)	(0.056)	(0.156)
Destination class (q)	0.485***	0.486***	0.649*
	(0.040)	(0.056)	(0.156)
Interactive term			
Upward mobility			0.187
			(0.169)
Covariates			
Men		0.040***	0.040***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Age		0.004***	0.004***
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Ethnic minorities		0.135***	0.135***
		(0.017)	(0.017)
Healthy		−0.012	−0.012
		(0.016)	(0.016)
Migrants		0.031*	0.031*
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Have at least one child		0.115***	0.114***
		(0.021)	(0.021)
Party member		0.023	0.022
		(0.017)	(0.017)
Work in public sector		−0.048***	−0.048***
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Spouse class			
Intermediate class		−0.003	−0.003
		(0.016)	(0.016)
Manual workers		0.000	−0.000
		(0.017)	(0.017)
Farmers		0.039*	0.039*
		(0.019)	(0.019)
Jobless/Retired		0.024	0.024
		(0.019)	(0.019)
Interview in 2017		0.076***	0.076***
		(0.012)	(0.012)
Region (ref: East)			
Northeast		−0.263***	−0.263***
		(0.016)	(0.016)
Middle		0.068***	0.067***
		(0.013)	(0.013)
West		0.056***	0.056***
		(0.013)	(0.013)
Constant	1.809 *** (0.015)	1.539 ***	1.541 ***
	(0.015)	(0.038)	(0.039)
AIC	42532.4	41789.0	41789.7
N	20,088	20,088	20,088

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

According to the parameters from the extended model for men and the parameters from the interactive model for women—which report the best goodness of fit—we made a prediction for desired number of children according to different mobility types for men and women in Fig. 4, with all covariates kept at their mean values. The farmer-related bars stand out with greater values for desired number of children, among which immobile farmers (top right bar) hold the highest values. According to the sample distribution across mobility types (Table 2), upward mobility makes up the majority of social mobility in China. Furthermore, a transformation from the farming class to non-farming classes makes up the largest proportion of upward mobility. It is thus reasonable to infer that the decline in desire to have children over the past few decades can be attributed to a certain extent to this trend of intergenerational mobility. However, although both male and female individuals of farming origin and destination hold a stronger desire for childbearing, the gaps between immobile farmers and other class-mobility types are larger for women than for men. Combined with the finding that women are more likely to be affected by destination class, it is evident that upward mobility has a larger negative effect on desired number of

Table 4
Diagonal reference models for estimating the intergenerational social mobility effect on desired number of children, by gender.

	Men		Women	
	Extended Model	Interactive Model	Extended Model	Interactive Model
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)				
Intermediate class	0.067	0.067	−0.035	−0.031
	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.030)	(0.031)
Manual workers	−0.045	−0.045	−0.070*	−0.061
	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.034)
Farmers	0.103**	0.103**	0.159***	0.162***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.033)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.616***	0.633**	0.414***	0.113
	(0.102)	(0.237)	(0.059)	(0.163)
Destination class (q)	0.384***	0.3670***	0.586***	0.887***
	(0.102)	(0.237)	(0.059)	(0.163)
Interactive term				
Upward mobility		−0.020		0.349
		(0.263)		(0.181)
Covariates				
Age	0.003**	0.003**	0.005***	0.005***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Ethnic minorities	0.134***	0.134***	0.134***	0.134***
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Healthy	−0.028	−0.028	0.002	0.003
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.021)	(0.021)
Migrants	0.039	0.039	0.022	0.022
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Have at least one child	0.108***	0.108***	0.126***	0.125***
	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Party member	0.007	0.007	0.071*	0.073*
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Work in public sector	−0.051**	−0.051**	−0.047*	−0.044*
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Spouse class				
Intermediate class	−0.031	−0.031	0.022	0.020
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.021)	(0.021)
Manual workers	−0.038	−0.038	0.007	0.003
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Farmers	0.061*	0.061*	−0.002	−0.005
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Jobless/Retired	0.028	0.028	−0.048	−0.051
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Interview in 2017	0.046*	0.046*	0.109***	0.109***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Region (ref: East)				
Northeast	−0.290***	−0.290***	−0.234***	−0.233***
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.021)	(0.021)
Middle	0.056**	0.056**	0.075***	0.074***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.017)
West	0.045*	0.045*	0.067***	0.066***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Constant	1.651 ***	1.651 ***	1.450 ***	1.443 ***
	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.052)	(0.053)
AIC	21172.5	21174.5	20453.8	20451.9
N	9819	9819	10,269	10,269

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

children for women than for men.

7.3. Robustness check

We conducted a four-step sensitivity analysis to ensure the robustness of our findings. The four steps are (a) examining subsamples in different age ranges, (b) exploring extra mobility effects, (c) replicating analysis after missing imputation, and (d) including mother's class into the social origin measure. A result summary drawn from each step can be found below, and its details can be found in Tables 1A–5A in the appendix.

First, it is necessary to specify the sensitivity of our findings to different age groups, as fertility desire and its childbirth outcome can be a dynamic process or a "moving target" that varies over the entire span of one's childbearing years (Hayford 2009; Huinink and Kohli 2014). We replicated the analytical steps with two sub-samples of younger and older respondents. The age range for the younger

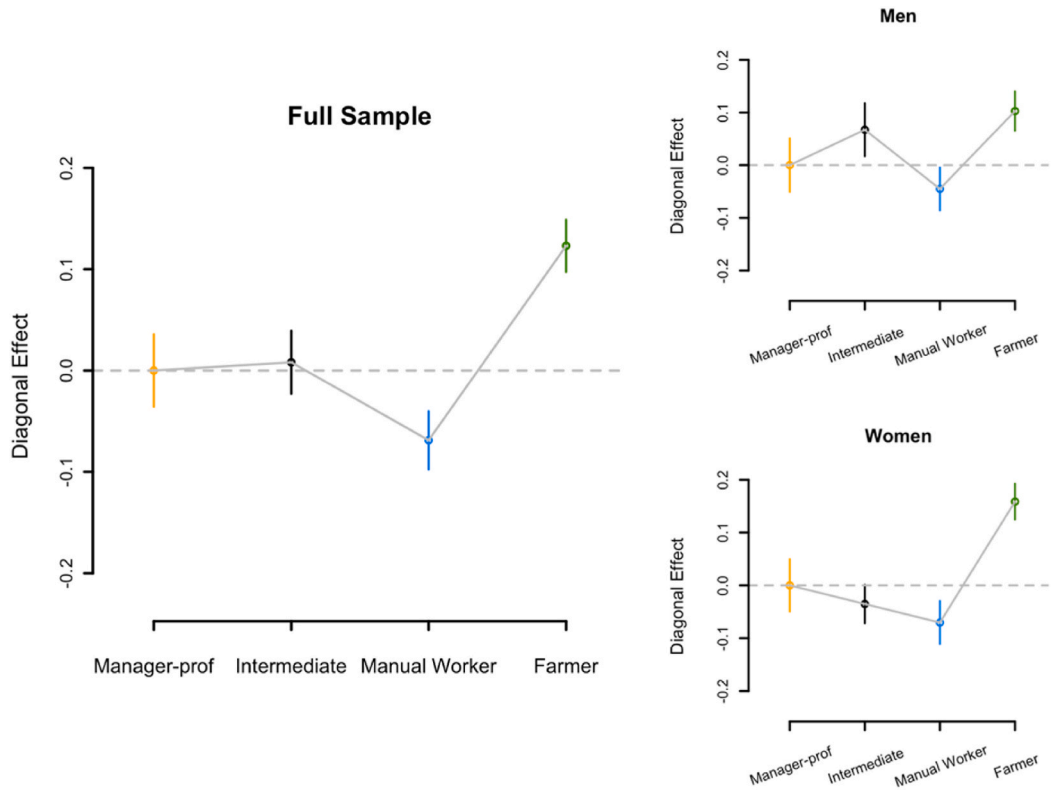

Fig. 2. The effect of immobile social class on desired number of children
Note: The bands show 95% confidence intervals estimated with quasi standard errors (Firth and De Menezes 2004).

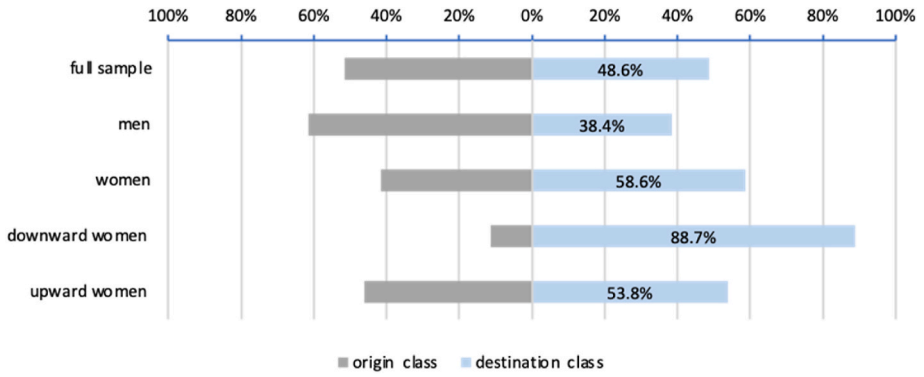

Fig. 3. Relative importance of origin class and destination class in determining desired number of children.

group is 22–40 for males and 20–35 for females. The age range for the older group is 41–59 for males and 36–49 for females. Results of the two sub-samples are consistent with most of our findings.

The second sensitivity check pertains to extra mobility effects. Our study assumes that one's fertility desire is molded by the additive effects of social origin and destination, while mobility experience itself contributes little to the desire. This assumption is considered the "null hypothesis" in mobility effect studies (Halaby and Sobel 1979). Mobility experience is likely to have an independent effect regardless of where the starting and ending points are (Sorokin 1927; Kasarda and Billy 1985; Easterlin 1976). To examine the extra mobility effect, we included two dummy variables in the models indicating upward mobility and downward mobility. The two dummies did not show any significant effects and adding them did not improve the goodness of fit of our models. This finding drives us to the conclusion that in our study, the experience of intergenerational mobility influences one's fertility desire simply through the additive effect of social origin and destination, with little impact of independent mobility being observed.

The third sensitivity check concerns the missing data in our sample. The proportion of missing data in our analyses is 16.8%, and most of the missing cases are due to missing information about the fathers' and children's occupations. Considering the potential bias

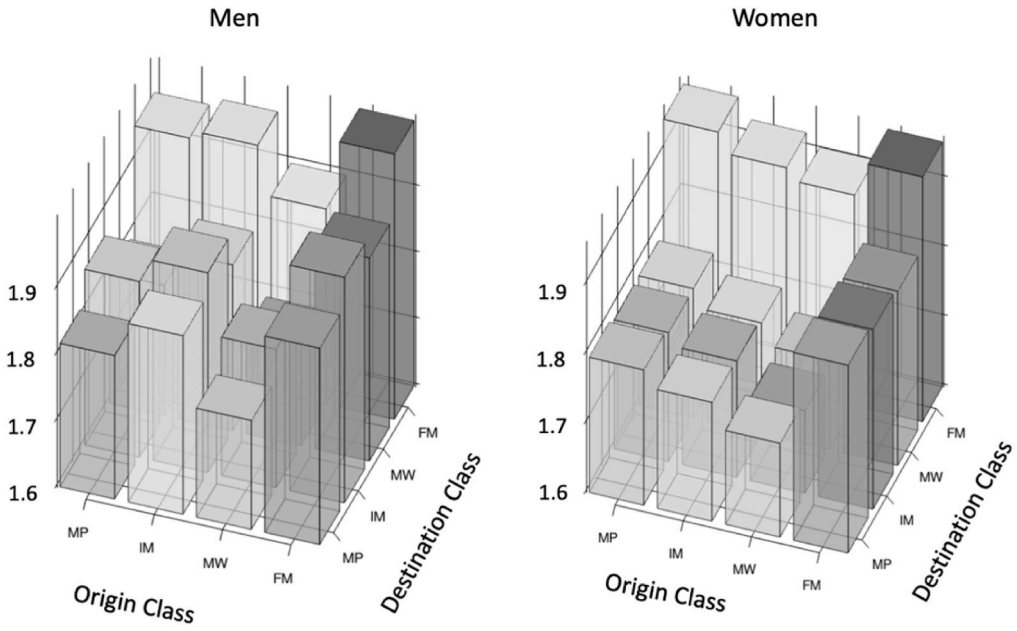

Fig. 4. Predicted desired number of children by mobility type, by gender
Note: Predicted values of men are based on the Extended Model, values of women are based on the Interactive Model. For the abbreviation of classes, MP = Managerial-professional Class, IM=Intermediate Class, MW = Manual Workers, FM=Farmers. Darkness of bar color represents the sample size of each bar (mobility type), with a darker bar indicating a larger sample size.

that missing cases might bring to our estimation, we applied multiple imputations, specifically the "chained equation" technique, to deal with this issue. The findings suggest that the patterns still hold after imputation.

Finally, following the tradition of stratification and mobility studies, we did not consider the mother's class when measuring social origin and instead focused on the class of fathers. Whether this operation biases our findings is a question that deserves attention. As such, we performed two sub-tests. First, we replaced the social origin measure with the mother's class position. Second, we used the highest parental class as a proxy for one's social origin (Beller 2009; Hout 2018). The statistical results of both sub-tests show very similar findings to what we have observed. Our findings are therefore confirmed through the above four-step robustness check.

8. Conclusions and discussion

This study takes an initial step in investigating how one's fertility desire is shaped by the experience of intergenerational social mobility using empirical evidence from China, where a fertility transition and large-scale class structure changes have been witnessed over the past few decades. The findings of this study are threefold. First, we revealed a checkmark-shaped relationship between social class and fertility desire among people who are immobile across generations in China. In more detail, farmers hold the strongest fertility desire, manual workers hold the lowest desire, and the managerial-professional and intermediate classes hold a moderately high desire. Second, for people who have experienced intergenerational mobility, their fertility desires are jointly shaped by their social origin and social destination, and the relative weights of the two effects are fairly close. This result implies that socialization in one's origin class and acculturalization in one's destination class are similarly crucial in the construction of fertility desire. Third, gender disparities were observed in the above two relationships. For the association between class and fertility desire, men from the intermediate class hold a preference for multiple children, which is moderately stronger than the desire of males from the higher class. However, this pattern was not observed among their female counterparts. For the relative importance of social origin and destination, compared to men, women are more likely to follow the family-structure norms of their destination class, rather than maintain the fertility attitudes that were internalized in the socialization process in their origin class.

In conclusion, our study makes three major contributions. The first pertains to the general discussion surrounding fertility desire. In contrast to most existing studies, which focus on the current socioeconomic constraints related to the decision to have children, this study explicitly recognizes the crucial role of past mobility experiences. According to our findings, the fertility desires of people from different class origins are likely to differ, even if they now share the same class position, due to the long-term impact of social origin. It can be expected that focusing on one's current socioeconomic status alone would cause a misunderstanding of the real determinants of childbearing desire. Combining the perspectives of social origin, current class, and mobility to explain fertility desire is therefore a necessity. In the traditional discussion surrounding the social mobility effect in Western societies around half a century ago, the number of children was examined as one of the outcome variables. Although the main purpose of this discussion was to methodologically decompose the social mobility effect, it nonetheless laid the foundation for linking social mobility experience with fertility attitudes and behaviors. The "halfway hypothesis" raised in this discussion (Blau and Duncan 1967), which states that one's childbirth

outcome often lies between the social norms of one's class origin and destination, was based on the experiences of societies wherein the fertility rate at the time was substantially above the replacement level. Our paper extends this hypothesis to a new era of low fertility by virtue of evidence from contemporary China.

Linking intergenerational mobility experience with fertility desire makes for a novel explanation of the rapid fertility decline in China, which is the second contribution of this study. Few previous studies have noticed that the decreasing desire to have multiple children among Chinese people has been closely interrelated with the extensive shift in class structure in the past few decades. The present paper fills this research gap. Our findings imply that extensive intergenerational mobility from farmers to manual workers and to other higher classes might be one of the primary underlying reasons behind the shrinking fertility desire in China. Based on government statistics (NBS 2021b), close to 12% of the entire population of China were rural migrants taking non-farming jobs in distant towns and cities in 2020. With the progress of urbanization and industrialization, this percentage is likely to increase further. The upward mobility of this rural group has extensively reduced their desire for multiple children, which was learned in their social origin as farmers. Hence, it can be anticipated that with continuing migration from rural to urban areas, the desired number of children among Chinese people is likely to decrease further. To reverse this trend, related policies for overcoming the low fertility desires of manual workers should be seriously considered.

The third contribution of this study lies in revealing women's dilemma of choosing between upward mobility and childbearing. Men who remain in the intermediate class are able to hold a strong preference for multiple children given their sufficient resources. However, for women of the intermediate class, having multiple children seems difficult. Women's upward intergenerational mobility in China, which mainly refers to moving from the farming class to the higher classes, is also associated with strong suppression of fertility desire. For these women, holding a strong childbearing desire seems to be incompatible with retaining a higher social position as well as with achieving upward mobility. Research and policies are needed to disentangle the mobility-fertility dilemma for women.

Several limitations in this study merit attention. First, the nationwide and long-lasting family planning policy in China may alter social norms about family structure and affect an individual's fertility desire. In this sense, using the hypothetical setting may not fully tease out the policy influence. Readers should interpret the results with great caution. The large family ideal among farmers might also be a result of the loose family planning policy in rural China. Second, the number of desired children if policy restrictions were not in place is different from another measure of fertility desire: intended number of children. The latter is closer to a real plan for childbirth and is considered a stronger predictor of fertility outcomes (Wu 2020). Future studies with proper data may use different fertility desire measures to test the robustness of our findings. Third, the analysis in the present study was conducted on an individual level. The couple perspective in childbearing decision-making (Ji et al. 2015; Peng 2020; Yao et al. 2018) is neglected due to data and method limitations. It can be expected that the social mobility trajectories of one's spouse, in particular the husband, could exert a significant impact on one's fertility desire. Unfortunately, the CGSS data does not provide any detailed mobility information on spouses, and the DRM does not allow the inclusion of paired mobility experiences. Future studies may explore this further by linking couples' social mobility experiences with their fertility desires.

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Conflicts of interest/Competing interests

No conflicts of interests or competing interests during the production of this paper.

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Appendix

Table 1A
Model Estimation by Age Group

	Men		Women	
	Older (41–59)	Younger (22–40)	Older (36–49)	Younger (20–35)
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)				
Intermediate class	0.054	0.056	−0.017	−0.058
	(0.055)	(0.044)	(0.040)	(0.043)
Manual workers	−0.031	−0.079	−0.07	−0.06

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1A (*continued*)

	Men		Women	
	Older (41–59)	Younger (22–40)	Older (36–49)	Younger (20–35)
	(0.049)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.049)
Farmers	0.128 **	0.061	0.169 ***	0.152 **
	(0.047)	(0.044)	(0.039)	(0.049)
Weight				
Original class (p)	0.697 ***	0.509 ***	0.405 ***	0.397 ***
	(0.149)	(0.134)	(0.075)	(0.093)
Destination class (q)	0.303 *	0.491 ***	0.595 ***	0.603 ***
	(0.149)	(0.134)	(0.075)	(0.093)
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.404 ***	1.680 ***	1.301 ***	1.544 ***
	(0.16)	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.11)
AIC	11255.5	9895.5	13395.5	7052.2
N	5044	4775	6531	3738

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 2A
Model Estimation with Extra Mobility Effect

	Full sample	Men	Women
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)			
Intermediate class	0.014	0.062	−0.028
	(0.024)	(0.036)	(0.031)
Manual workers	−0.063 **	−0.052	−0.066 *
	(0.024)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Farmers	0.133 ***	0.094 **	0.174 ***
	(0.024)	(0.035)	(0.033)
Weight			
Original class (p)	0.541 ***	0.582 ***	0.462 ***
	(0.069)	(0.114)	(0.074)
Destination class (q)	0.459 ***	0.418 ***	0.538 ***
	(0.069)	(0.114)	(0.074)
Mobility type (ref: Immobility)			
Upward mobility	−0.005	0.01	−0.005
	(0.013)	(0.018)	(0.019)
Downward mobility	0.019	−0.005	0.041
	(0.017)	(0.025)	(0.023)
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.534 ***	1.652 ***	1.444 ***
	(0.039)	(0.058)	(0.054)
AIC	41791.2	21176.0	20453.8
N	20,088	9819	10,269

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 3A
Model Estimation after Missing Imputation

	Full sample	Men	Women
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)			
Intermediate class	0.014	0.079*	−0.034
	(0.022)	(0.035)	(0.028)
Manual workers	−0.054*	−0.032	−0.047
	(0.022)	(0.031)	(0.034)
Farmers	0.136***	0.13***	0.157***
	(0.022)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Weight			
Original class (p)	0.506***	0.608***	0.380***
	(0.059)	(0.087)	(0.069)
Destination class (q)	0.494***	0.392***	0.620***
	(0.059)	(0.087)	(0.069)
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.650***	0.671***	0.627***
	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.004)
N	23,301	11,075	12,226

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 4A
Model Estimation with Mother's Class as Social Origin

	Full sample	Men	Women
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)			
Intermediate class	−0.025	−0.011	−0.034
	(0.031)	(0.05)	(0.035)
Manual workers	−0.097 **	−0.113 *	−0.032
	(0.032)	(0.046)	(0.04)
Farmers	0.172 ***	0.165 ***	0.204 ***
	(0.03)	(0.043)	(0.037)
Weight			
Original class (p)	0.597***	0.739***	0.396***
	(0.045)	(0.068)	(0.065)
Destination class (q)	0.403***	0.261***	0.604***
	(0.045)	(0.068)	(0.065)
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.561***	1.659***	1.496***
	(0.038)	(0.057)	(0.053)
AIC	33815.15	16,960	16762.25
N	17,309	8422	8887

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Table 5A
Model Estimation with Parental Highest Class as Social Origin

	Full sample	Men	Women
Diagonal effect (ref: Managerial-professional)			
Intermediate class	−0.002	0.063	−0.049
	(0.023)	(0.034)	(0.03)
Manual workers	−0.061**	−0.03	−0.07*
	(0.023)	(0.032)	(0.035)
Farmers	0.129***	0.119***	0.153***
	(0.022)	(0.03)	(0.031)
Weight			
Original class (p)	0.506***	0.621***	0.414***
	(0.056)	(0.100)	(0.064)
Destination class (q)	0.494***	0.379***	0.586***
	(0.056)	(0.100)	(0.064)
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.557***	1.683***	1.467***
	(0.036)	(0.053)	(0.049)
AIC	39660.99	20114.88	19401.58
N	20,088	9819	10,269

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

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