

Chinese society

China's marriage problem: fewer young people, and fewer weddings

Ageing population, falling birth rates and aversion to matrimony compound demographic challenge



China's younger people are shying away from marriage at the same time that the population is ageing and shrinking © Hector Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

Thomas Hale and **Wang Xueqiao** in Shanghai and **Tina Hu** and **Wenjie Ding** in Beijing 4 HOURS AGO

Eric Huang did not make the traditional journey from Shanghai to his family's hometown last month for lunar new year, when he feared an uncomfortable conversation with his parents.

"We often talk about [marriage] on the phone, so if I went I know how it would be," said Huang, 32. For his father, "the fact that I am not married is not ideal".

"He would talk about children as well . . . it's not just marriage," he added.

Huang's situation reflects a deep shift across [Chinese society](#): fewer young people are getting married. New marriage registrations fell 20.5 per cent in 2024 to just 6.1mn, the biggest drop on record and the lowest level since 1978, according to government data released this week.

While the extent of the decline partly reflected a rebound in weddings in 2023 after the Covid-19 pandemic, it also pointed to an aversion to marriage among young people at precisely a time when Beijing is trying to encourage more births to counter a rapidly ageing population.

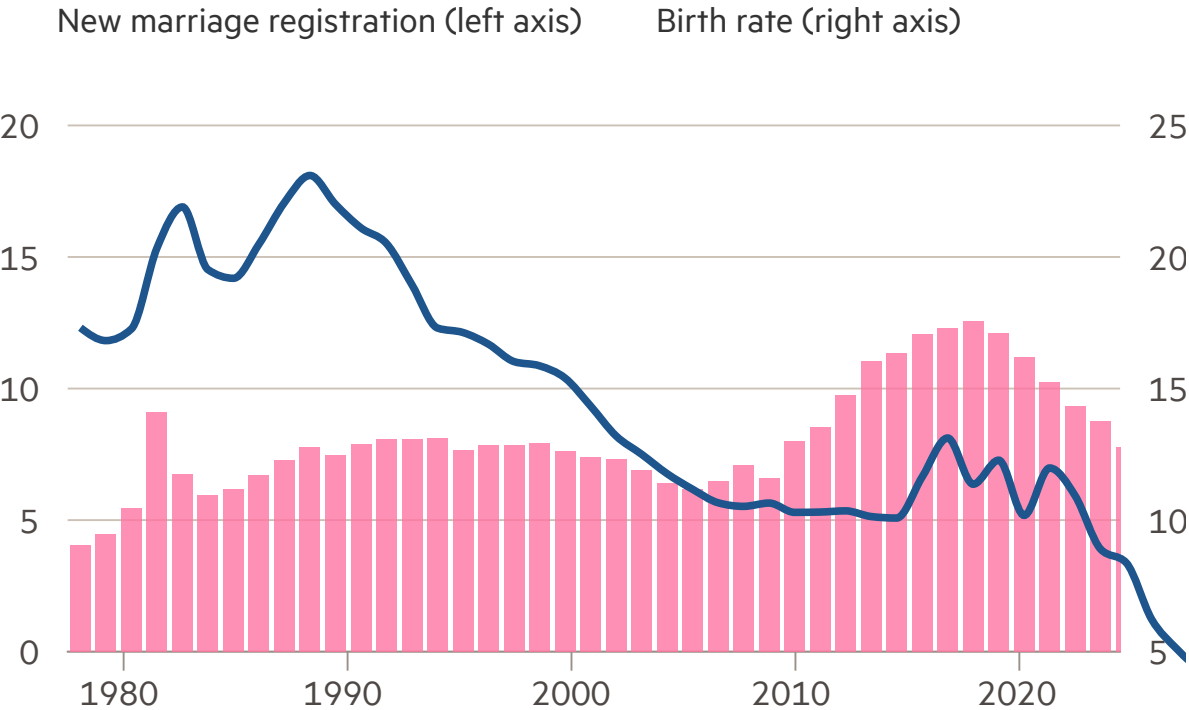
“People’s willingness to marry has significantly decreased. This is very clear,” says Huang Wenzheng, a specialist in demographics at the Center for China and Globalisation in Beijing.

The change poses a long-term challenge to policymakers in the world’s second-largest economy, who are contending with the immediate challenges of a lower growth rate and a property slowdown.

Huang, who also pointed to higher levels of education, urbanisation and a weaker economic backdrop, predicted that the marriage rate would “definitely decline” this year and next, albeit at a slower rate. “This is a long-term trend.”

Chinese marriages hit a near 50-year low in 2024

Number of new marriage registrations (mn) and crude birth rate (per 1,000 people)



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Civil Affairs

China's population has recorded three consecutive years of declines, after the one-child policy that limited births for decades. The result is a smaller cohort of younger, marriage-aged people and fewer births, though the [birth rate did tick up](#) from a record low in 2024 — a year with an auspicious zodiac sign and following 2023's bump in marriages.

Since the end of the one-child policy in 2016, Chinese authorities have [stepped up a campaign](#) to encourage couples to marry and have children.

The state council, China's cabinet, unveiled measures in October to promote a “fertility-friendly society”, including improving maternity leave and the availability of reproductive health services, while municipalities have offered cash subsidies to newly married couples of new parents.

Authorities have also sought to tap into the country's changing demographics by promoting a “silver economy” of services focused on seniors. This week, authorities announced plans for a nationwide network of [trains catering to elderly tourists](#).

But these official efforts have run into antipathy among Chinese graduates, who [face a tough job market](#) and persistent high housing prices in the biggest cities despite a property sector crisis.

China's population is ageing much faster than the rest of the world

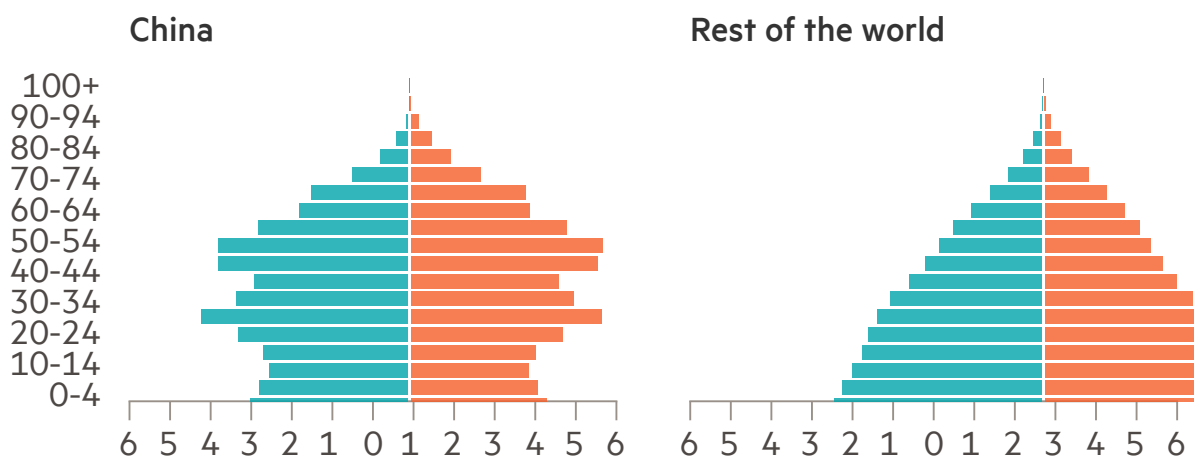
Population projection (% of total population), by age and gender, 2025-2100

Click play button to start animation



2025

Men Women



Source: UN World Population Prospects 2024, FT calculations

Zheng, a 28-year-old primary school teacher in a small town in coastal Zhejiang province who asked to be referred to only by her surname, said the “competitive and harsh” education system had turned her off the idea of having children.

“The whole educational environment is exhausting . . . if you have a child in this environment, what can you offer them except hardship?”

She said she had blocked most of her friends who posted pictures of their children on WeChat, a social media platform. “I’m content with my current lifestyle,” she said. “I have a group of like-minded unmarried friends to hang out with.” She added that the men in her town were “inadequate”.

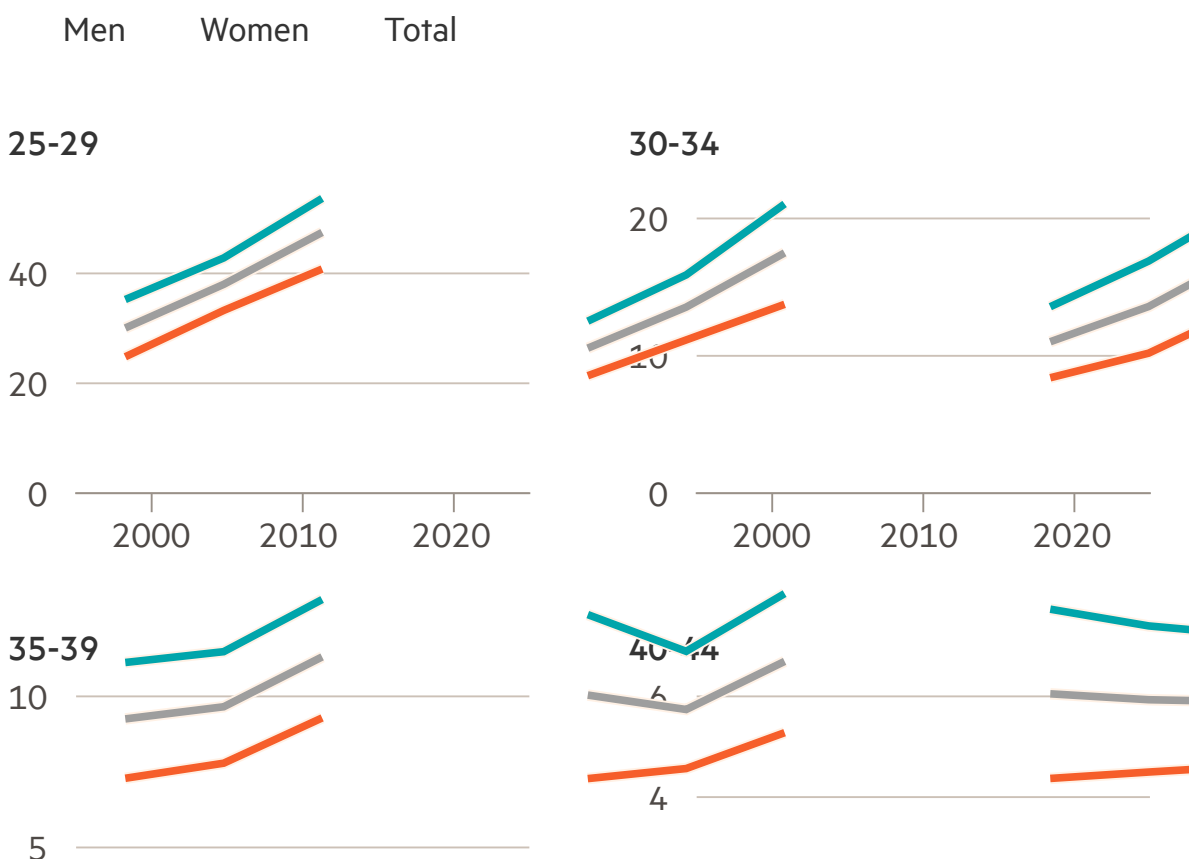
Wu, a 32-year-old editor in Beijing who also asked to be identified only by his surname, said he was open to marriage but “strongly opposed” to children. His objection stemmed not only from the high costs of having children in the capital but “dissatisfaction with society”.

“Our generation” — most of whom are only children — “tends to focus more on individuality,” he said, adding that family values [in his generation] were “fading”. Much of China remained “conservative”, he added.



Younger people are remaining unmarried at higher rates than preceding generations

Proportion (%) and estimated total population of unmarried people (mn), by age and gender



Longer-term data highlights a dramatic change in attitudes towards marriage over recent generations. In 2000, an estimated 0.19 per cent of Chinese women over the age of 50 were unmarried, a figure that rose to just 0.44 per cent by 2020. Over the same period, the percentage of unmarried women aged 25 to 29 increased from 8.7 per cent to 33.2 per cent.

Huang at CCG suggested the legacy of the one-child policy had created a “perception that having children is unnecessary”. Young Chinese adults are “used to their parents fulfilling all their needs”.

“This is difficult to replicate with a partner,” he said.

Meanwhile, the number of divorces increased 1.1 per cent last year to 2.6mn. There are now more “leftover men” and “leftover women”, Huang said, a term in China for unmarried people. References to being “left over” during the new year were rife on Chinese social media in recent weeks.

For Eric Huang, who spent the holiday celebrating with friends in Shanghai, the new year period is particularly painful. His father sees marriage as a duty, “just like all traditional families”.

“I can understand their ideas but I don’t want to listen to them,” he said. “I don’t want to change their ideas. So I can only escape.”

Data visualisation by Haohsiang Ko

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