

Reimagining Norm and Timing: the Relationship between Urban-to-Urban Migration and Delaying Childbearing in Shenzhen, China

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With the clear question ‘why young intra-urban migrants to big cities delay their entry into parenthood’, this paper qualitatively examines urban-to-urban internal migration and its role in delayed childbearing in Shenzhen, China. Within the existing theoretical frameworks that explore the intersection of migration and fertility behaviours, there are five principal theories, socialisation perspective, assimilation, adaptation, selection and disruption (Lindstrom et al., 2021). The paper draws on rich personal narratives collected through 60 life story interviews to engage with the latter three theories. The paper argues that, first, diverging from the existing selection theory, which posits that socioeconomic factors characterising individuals with migrating intention (Majelantle & Navaneetham, 2013), in Shenzhen, young adults who critically assess normative life courses and seek upward social mobility are inclined to migrate intracity and delay childbearing. Second, in line with disruption theory focusing on the act of migration itself, this paper suggests that migration disperses families, who are normally the upholder of traditional norms. This in turn enables individuals to re-imagine childbearing timing. Third, the paper engages with adaptation theory which underscores the influence of destination characteristics on fertility patterns (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1982). It presents an innovative argument that Shenzhen, as a large and migrant city inherently featuring loose social connections and inclusive values, grants young migrants more agency to redefine and reappropriate norms, thus permitting a broader tolerance for non-conventional life course transitions. The research concludes that younger adults in China may undertake intracity migration as a strategic choice to carve out new avenues for personal agency in their life trajectories that entail delayed childbearing.