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# Fertility Norms as Unifying Framework: Coordinating Migration and Fertility Decisions in China's Internal Migration

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## ABSTRACT

Research on the migration-fertility nexus has generated five theoretical mechanisms – socialisation, assimilation, selection, disruption, and adaptation – that are typically examined in isolation from one another. Drawing on 66 life-story interviews with internal migrants in Shenzhen, China, this article argues that these mechanisms share a common foundation in fertility norms, understood as socially embedded expectations about reproduction. While socialisation and assimilation have always centred on normative processes, the empirical analysis demonstrates that selection, disruption, and adaptation are likewise mediated by fertility norms – shaping how migrants assess destinations (selection), experience changes in normative constraint (disruption), and reinterpret reproductive expectations across contexts (adaptation). By establishing fertility norms as a unifying analytical lens, the article shows that migration and fertility operate as coordinated life domains. The analysis reveals that prior to migration, individuals evaluate destinations in light of anticipated fertility norms (selection). During migration and settlement, geographic separation from origin communities weakens normative monitoring and sanctioning, creating space for revising reproductive plans (disruption). Over time, sustained exposure to destination contexts reshapes fertility orientations and practices (adaptation), all unfolding against the longer-term influence of childhood socialisation and intergenerational assimilation. This coordination reveals individuals as strategic navigators who integrate spatial mobility and reproductive decisions together, rather than experiencing them as separate, sequential events.

## 1 | Introduction

Migration and fertility are two core demographic processes that jointly shape population dynamics (Beaujouan 2020; Haas et al. 2019). At the population level, empirical evidence demonstrates systematic associations between migration and fertility outcomes: cross-national analyses find that rural-to-urban migration is linked with lower fertility through compositional change and shifts in local normative contexts (such as Lerch 2019), and longitudinal register studies of international migrants document fertility trajectories that converge toward destination patterns over

time (such as Tønnessen 2020). At the individual level, however, these aggregate patterns raise a fundamental question: through what processes do migration experiences shape reproductive decision-making within people's lives?

To account for these systematic associations between migration and fertility, existing research has proposed the following five theoretical mechanisms. Socialisation emphasises the persistence of origin-based fertility norms among migrants (e.g. Hertz 1985; Kulu 2005). Assimilation and adaptation highlight changes in fertility behaviour following prolonged

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exposure to destination contexts, often resulting in convergence toward local fertility patterns (e.g. Hertz 1985; Kulu and González-Ferrer 2014). Selection focuses on how individuals with particular fertility preferences or family orientations self-select into migration (e.g. Goldstein and Goldstein 1983; Kulu and Milewski 2007). Disruption points to temporary fertility declines associated with the practical, relational, and economic costs of moving, which may delay childbearing around the time of migration (e.g. Hertz 1985; Andersson 2004). Rather than representing competing explanations, these five mechanisms capture distinct processes through which migration and fertility become linked.

Since their emergence between the 1970s and 1990s, these mechanisms have dominated migration-fertility research, yet theoretical development has remained limited (Kulu 2005). Two interrelated problems constrain further progress. First, while these mechanisms are grounded in individual-level and life-course perspectives, empirical research has predominantly operationalised migration and fertility as analytically separate, time-ordered events. Event-history studies commonly model migration as a time-varying covariate predicting subsequent fertility transitions, positioning mobility as a prior condition and fertility as the outcome (Andersson 2004; Lindstrom et al. 2021). This design captures statistical associations but provides limited leverage for examining how individuals coordinate these decisions as interconnected life domains.

Second, the five mechanisms have developed largely in isolation, each emphasising different aspects of the migration-fertility relationship: cultural orientations (socialisation, assimilation), structural conditions (adaptation, disruption), or individual characteristics (selection). While each captures important processes, they are rarely theorised together in ways that explain how multiple mechanisms operate within the same individual's experience. This fragmentation limits cumulative theoretical development and makes it difficult to explain cases where different mechanisms interact or contradict one another.

This article addresses these limitations by proposing fertility norms as a unifying analytical framework. Drawing on 66 life-story interviews with internal migrants in Shenzhen, China, the study demonstrates that fertility norms – understood as socially embedded expectations about reproduction – provide a shared mechanism through which all five classical theories can be analytically connected. While socialisation and assimilation already foreground normative processes, the empirical analysis reveals that selection, disruption, and adaptation also operate through fertility norm mediation: migrants assess destinations based on perceived norm compatibility (selection), experience weakened normative enforcement through geographic separation (disruption), and progressively reinterpret fertility expectations through sustained destination exposure (adaptation).

Building on a life-course perspective that emphasises how individuals coordinate major transitions over time (Elder 1994), this norm-centred framework, implemented through life-story approach, enables analysis of migration and fertility as interrelated decisions rather than sequential events. The framework specifies what individuals actually navigate when coordinating these life domains: not merely economic constraints or demographic disruptions, but competing normative expectations about when, whether, and under what conditions to have

children. This formulation connects population-level patterns to the micro-level processes through which individuals construct coherent biographical trajectories.

This research offers three contributions. First, in a field dominated by quantitative event-history analyses, this qualitative study employing life-story interviews advances theoretical development by revealing coordination processes that statistical approaches cannot directly capture, offering conceptual directions that may inform future quantitative research designs. Second, responding to calls to “bring norms back” into demographic analysis (Liefbroer and Billari 2010), this study underscores the importance of norms in understanding both fertility behaviour and the migration-fertility nexus, demonstrating that normative processes mediate all five classical mechanisms. Third, by grounding migration-fertility coordination in normative navigation, this research reveals individuals as active agents who strategically negotiate competing expectations across spatial contexts, rather than passive respondents to structural conditions or fixed preferences. The following sections develop the theoretical framework, detail the methodology, present empirical findings, and discuss broader implications.

## 2 | Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 | Classical Migration-Fertility Theories: Sequential Assumptions and Fragmented Frameworks

Migration-fertility research has been structured around five classical theoretical frameworks that emerged primarily between the 1970s and 1990s: socialisation, assimilation, adaptation, selection, and disruption. These theories have contributed to explaining why migrants may exhibit fertility patterns that differ from non-migrants. Yet in empirical practice they are often implemented in ways that (a) treat migration and fertility as analytically separable, time-ordered events, and (b) operationalise distinct mechanisms in isolation – practices that hinder the ability to explain how these mechanisms may interact within an individual life course (Kulu 2005; Majelantle and Navaneetham 2013). The limitation is methodological and inferential: standard operational choices in the literature tend to produce sequential, macro-like representations of migration effects even when individual-level data are used, as discussed below.

Socialisation and assimilation theories both foreground the role of cultural and normative orientations in shaping migrants' fertility behaviour, but they locate the source and timing of normative effects at different points in the life course. Socialisation theory emphasises the early-life formation of fertility preferences and family ideals, arguing that norms acquired during childhood remain relatively stable and continue to shape behaviour after migration (Goldstein and Goldstein 1983; Hertz 1985). This perspective assumes that meaningful normative change requires generational time frames, reflecting the deep-rooted nature of early socialisation experiences. Empirically, socialisation is most often operationalised by comparing migrants' fertility outcomes with those of non-migrants in their regions of origin, or by using cohort- and background-based indicators to proxy childhood normative exposure (such as Goldstein and Goldstein 1983). In such designs, migration and

fertility are analytically separated: migration status serves as an independent variable, fertility as a dependent outcome, and normative influence is treated as a fixed background attribute anchored in pre-migration experiences.

Assimilation theory, by contrast, recognises early socialisation but emphasises post-migration normative change, arguing that migrants gradually adopt destination fertility norms through sustained exposure (Kahn 1994; Parrado and Morgan 2008). Assimilation is typically conceptualised as occurring over extended periods, often across generations, as migrants and their descendants progressively converge toward destination patterns. Empirical studies operationalise assimilation using duration-since-migration or time-since-arrival measures, testing whether fertility behaviour converges toward destination patterns over time (Parrado and Morgan 2008). Both socialisation and assimilation accounts have made fertility norms central to migration-fertility research. However, their empirical implementations tend to model normative influence either as a stable origin-based characteristic or as a monotonic function of time in destination, thereby capturing normative effects as either temporally fixed (socialisation) or monotonically evolving (assimilation).

Selection, disruption, and adaptation theories focus on mechanisms operating over shorter time horizons, but they differ in the causal direction and timing they emphasise. Selection theory argues that migrants represent non-random samples with unobserved fertility preferences that are revealed through destination choices rather than changed by migration experiences (Lindstrom and Saucedo 2002; Ribe and Schultz 1980). Researchers like Lindstrom and Saucedo (2002), using retrospective fertility and migration histories, often model selection by examining whether fertility preferences prior to migration predict migration timing and destination choice.

Disruption theory emphasises how migration processes temporarily reduce fertility through mechanisms including spousal separation and psychological stress, with effects expected to diminish over time (Goldstein 1973; Lindstrom 2003). Empirical tests often identify fertility dips in narrow windows surrounding migration events, treating disruption as a short-term shock after which normal patterns resume. For instance, Goldstein (1973), examining internal migration in Thailand, documents temporary fertility suppression associated with spousal separation during migration.

Adaptation theory emphasises post-migration structural and economic effects, such as increased opportunity costs or living expenses in destination areas (Bean and Swicegood 1985). Operationally, adaptation is frequently tested using duration-of-residence variables that examine whether fertility converges toward destination patterns over time (Andersson 2004; Kulu 2005), or through event-history models comparing fertility risks across residential contexts (Kulu and González-Ferrer 2014). While both adaptation and assimilation describe convergence toward destination patterns, they differ in mechanism and temporality: assimilation emphasises gradual normative change across extended periods or generations, whereas adaptation focuses on shorter-term behavioural adjustments to structural conditions. Whether adaptation also involves normative change – not just behavioural response to economic pressures – remains underexplored.

Across these approaches, a common methodological pattern prevails: migration is modelled either as a prior condition (selection, duration/exposure variables) or as a short-term shock (disruption), and fertility is modelled as an outcome or a trajectory responding to migration (see Kulu and Milewski 2007, for a review). Even when individual-level data are used, fertility is typically treated as a response to prior migration experiences or pre-existing preferences, rather than as part of a decision-making process that unfolds alongside migration itself. These design choices make it difficult to capture dynamic, bidirectional coordination, implicitly conceptualising individuals as passive responders to migration-related conditions rather than strategic planners who integrate spatial mobility and reproductive decisions within unified biographical trajectories.

Beyond this sequential treatment, the theories have also developed largely in isolation from one another, without a shared framework for analysing how multiple mechanisms may operate simultaneously within the same life courses. Each theory emphasises a different temporal scale – early-life socialisation, short-term disruption, gradual adaptation, or generational assimilation – yet offers little guidance on how these temporal processes intersect or interact. Moreover, while the theories identify distinct causal mechanisms (cultural persistence, economic constraint, self-selection), they lack a shared conceptual vocabulary for analysing how these processes might co-occur or interact within individual life courses. This fragmentation limits theoretical accumulation: findings from one framework cannot easily inform or be integrated with another, making it difficult to understand why the same migrant might simultaneously exhibit patterns consistent with multiple theories.

## 2.2 | The Life Course Approach to Migration-Fertility Coordination

Life course perspectives offer essential insights for reconceptualising migration-fertility relationships beyond sequential models. The life course approach emphasises that major life transitions – including spatial mobility, family formation, and reproductive decisions – are interconnected processes that individuals coordinate within unified biographical trajectories rather than separate, independently determined events (Elder 1994; Elder and Giele 2009). Central to life course thinking is the recognition that individuals are not passive recipients of external influences but active agents who strategically navigate life transitions through purposeful decision-making and adaptive planning (Hitlin and Elder 2007). This agentic capacity involves drawing upon past experiences, engaging in future-oriented strategising, and coordinating actions across different life spheres in response to changing circumstances and opportunities (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Life course perspectives thus provide theoretical foundations for understanding migration and fertility as mutually constituted rather than causally ordered processes. This approach enables examination of how individuals navigate the temporal and spatial dimensions of life planning, revealing the strategic thinking and coordinated decision-making that underlies demographic patterns. By adopting life course frameworks, migration-fertility research can move beyond treating them as separate events toward understanding the integrated planning

processes through which individuals construct coherent biographical trajectories that encompass both spatial mobility and reproductive goals.

### 2.3 | Fertility Norms As Unifying Framework: Bridging Theory and Individual Experience

Building on life course foundations, this research identifies fertility norms as a unifying framework for integrating classical migration-fertility theories. The review of classical theories offers the clue: socialisation and assimilation frameworks already place fertility norms at the centre of migration-fertility dynamics – socialisation emphasising the persistence of origin norms, assimilation foregrounding gradual adoption of destination norms. This existing recognition suggests that norms may offer a more general theoretical resource than has been exploited. If normative processes are central to explaining cultural transmission (socialisation) and cultural change (assimilation), might they also mediate the mechanisms emphasised by selection, disruption, and adaptation? This research pursues that possibility, proposing fertility norms as a unifying framework that can integrate the fragmented classical theories while specifying the substantive content of individual-level coordination.

Fertility norms refer to the shared expectations within a community about the appropriate timing, sequencing, and conditions for childbearing (Liefbroer and Billari 2010). Importantly, unlike attitudes or preferences, which are individual-level orientations, norms are inherently social yet individually experienced, thereby bridging social structure and individual agency (Settersten and Gannon 2005). They are transmitted through networks, enforced through sanctions or approval, and experienced as external constraints or enabling scripts that individuals must navigate (Bernardi 2003; Kohler 2001). Research has identified three primary channels through which norms shape fertility behaviour: social learning (observing others' experiences), social pressure (perceived expectations from family or community), and social support (resources conditional on normative compliance) (Bernardi 2003; Rossier and Bernardi 2009; Munshi and Myaux 2006). This dual nature – simultaneously social and individual – makes fertility norms particularly valuable for analysing how macro-level patterns emerge from micro-level decision-making processes.

Previous research on fertility norms thus establishes two points relevant to migration-fertility theory. First, norms are spatially and socially embedded: different communities maintain distinct normative expectations, and individuals are differentially exposed depending on their network position (Liefbroer and Merz 2009; Munshi and Myaux 2006). For migration research, this spatial embeddedness means that migrants encounter different normative environments across origin and destination contexts. Thus, it further informs that norms are not merely background influences but active mechanisms that individuals encounter and negotiate in practice. Rather than treating “place” as a container of structural constraints, this perspective conceptualises origin and destination as distinct normative landscapes that migrants interpret and navigate. Qualitative studies confirm that reproductive decision-making involves ongoing negotiation between family expectations, peer influences, and personal aspirations rather than passive conformity

to fixed cultural templates (James-Hawkins and Sennott 2015; Willan et al. 2020).

Despite this broader recognition of norms' importance, their application within migration-fertility research has remained confined to socialisation and assimilation frameworks. If migration involves movement between communities with different normative environments, then norms are potentially implicated in all migration-fertility processes. Liefbroer and Billari (2010), reviewing theoretical and empirical literature on norms and demographic behaviour, called for demographers to “bring norms back in,” demonstrating through Dutch data that normative expectations significantly shape life course transitions even in highly individualised societies. The following section then, considers why China's internal migration context provides a particularly suitable empirical setting for examining these norm-mediated processes.

### 2.4 | Fertility Norms and Migration-Fertility Dynamics in China

#### 2.4.1 | China as a Suitable Context for Examining Norm-Mediated Coordination

China has recorded the largest internal migration population in history, growing from approximately 150 million rural migrants in the early 1990s to 286 million by 2020, accounting for 20% of the country's total population – a volume comparable to global international migration (Guo et al. 2024). This context provides a particularly suitable setting for examining fertility norm mediation in migration-fertility coordination for three interconnected reasons.

First, China exhibits pronounced fertility norm differentials across its development hierarchy. Similar to international patterns where family-related attitudes are more flexible and individualised in metropolitan areas (Riederer and Beaujouan 2024), China demonstrates substantial normative gradients from less developed regions to first-tier cities. Traditional family-formation norms have undergone the most substantial modification in more developed urban areas (Gui 2023; Yu and Xie 2022; Zhang et al. 2025). Empirical findings show that second-child fertility intentions are lowest in first-tier cities at 37%, with higher rates in less developed areas (Yang et al. 2023). This normative gradient means that internal migrants from less developed origins to metropolitan destinations traverse different normative landscapes, creating conditions where norm navigation becomes empirically visible and analytically tractable.

Second, as a society characterised by strong collectivist orientations (Hofstede 2001), China exhibits particularly pronounced normative influences on reproductive behaviour. Social norms and peer effects significantly shape individual fertility preferences and outcomes, with neighbourhood and group expectations influencing fertility intentions (Nie et al. 2025; Yu and Liang 2022). In particular, parents and extended family members exercise significant influence through family negotiations and intergenerational power relations (Gui 2023; Peng 2020; Shen and Jiang 2021). This cultural context means that fertility norms are not abstract background factors but actively enforced expectations that migrants must navigate – making normative processes both consequential and observable.

Third, the internal migration in China offers additional analytical advantages for examining the norm-mediated processes compared with international migration. The predominant focus on international migration in previous research has overlooked substantial internal migration and its distinct characteristics (King and Skeldon 2010). Because internal migrants move within a single legal and linguistic system, institutional frameworks remain largely constant across origin and destination. This configuration allows normative processes to be observed more clearly than in international migration settings, where legal status, citizenship rights, and language barriers often dominate migrants' experiences and may obscure subtler normative dynamics (Bernard and Kalemba 2022).

Substantial research has examined internal migration–fertility relationships across diverse contexts. Quantitative studies using event-history methods have examined migration–fertility linkages in Latin America (Lindstrom 2003), sub-Saharan Africa (Brockerhoff 1995), and post-socialist Europe (Kulu 2005), documenting patterns of disruption, adaptation, and selection among internal migrants. Some studies implicitly acknowledge cultural and normative influences – Lindstrom (2003) notes the role of “reproductive norms” in rural Guatemala, and Kulu (2005) references “fertility preferences” shaped by childhood environments. These studies demonstrate the value of life-course data for understanding migration–fertility relationships. However, event-history designs, while using individual-level life-course data, typically operationalise migration as a time-varying covariate predicting subsequent fertility transitions (see Kulu and Milewski 2007, for a review). This specification provides limited leverage for examining how individuals coordinate these decisions as interconnected life domains. Norms enter these analyses as background context rather than explicit mediating mechanisms.

This research complements existing quantitative research by employing life-story interviews to capture the anticipatory planning, normative negotiation, and strategic integration processes that statistical approaches cannot directly observe. The theoretical insights developed here, while grounded in China's internal migration context, may have broader applicability in international migration, but are more difficult to isolate amid structural discontinuities. As King and Skeldon (2010) argue, integrating internal and international migration in analysis can yield broader theoretical insights; this research contributes to that agenda by developing conceptual tools from internal migration that may inform migration–fertility research more generally.

#### 2.4.2 | *Fertility Norms in the Context of China*

Having established why China provides a suitable research context, this section details the specific content of Chinese fertility norms and their enforcement mechanisms. Chinese fertility norms specify clear expectations about whether, when, and under what conditions to have children. First, universal childbearing remains a foundational norm for most: the expectation that all married women should bear children persists as a taken-for-granted life course transition (Evans 2002; McMillan 2014; Xie 2021). Non-marital childbearing remains socially unacceptable, rendering marriage a prerequisite for legitimate reproduction (Yu and Xie 2022; Zhang et al. 2025).

Second, following the relaxation of the one-child policy, having two children is now widely regarded as the ideal family size and normative standard (Nie et al. 2025). Third, fertility timing follows strict normative schedules, with age 30 widely perceived as the upper boundary of the ideal childbearing window (Xie 2021), creating pressure for women to complete family formation within narrow timeframes. These norms are enforced through multiple social channels as illustrated above. This combination of clearly articulated expectations, active enforcement through social networks, and substantial spatial variation makes China's fertility norms well-suited for examining the norm-mediated processes theorised above.

#### 2.4.3 | *Existing Research and Theoretical Gaps*

Against this normative backdrop, existing research on Chinese migration–fertility relationships has produced findings that both align with and diverge from classical theoretical predictions. Yang (2000) “detachment hypothesis” challenged simple theoretical applications by arguing that institutional separation between migrants' actual and legal residence creates opportunities to escape family planning controls, potentially increasing rather than decreasing fertility among temporary migrants. Guo (2007) argues that migration per se has no significant impact on fertility behaviours because structural factors reducing urban residents' fertility – such as pension systems – remain unavailable to migrants, limiting adaptation effects.

Other studies have found patterns more consistent with classical predictions. Werwath (2011) found that rural-to-urban migrants exhibit fertility levels intermediate between rural origins and urban destinations, consistent with adaptation theory. Liang et al. (2014) demonstrated that upward migration decreases fertility and downward migration increases it, with traditional fertility concepts moderating these relationships. Their findings implicitly acknowledge fertility norms – noting how “traditional concepts on fertility” remain anchored in people's minds – yet do not explicitly theorise norms as mediating mechanisms. More recently, Yi and Shangguan (2024) found that urban-to-urban migrants adopt more conservative fertility decisions while developing more liberal attitudes toward childbearing, suggesting complex interactions between migration experiences and normative change.

Across these studies, fertility norms are implicitly recognised through references to “traditional concepts,” “cultural preferences,” and “attitudes toward childbearing,” but have not been systematically theorised as mechanisms that could integrate different migration–fertility processes. Moreover, much existing research was conducted around 2010 when restrictive policy contexts shaped both migration and fertility patterns (Guo 2007; Liang et al. 2014). Contemporary China presents a different context, with relaxed migration controls and fertility policies shifting from one-child to three-child provisions (Jing et al. 2022; Liang 2016).

Situated within this context, this research contributes to the field from three aspects. First, explicitly theorising fertility norms as a unifying mechanism across all five classical frameworks. Second, employing qualitative methods to capture the coordination processes of migration and fertility within individual life trajectories that quantitative approaches cannot directly observe. Third, the integrative perspective of fertility

norms may provide a coherent explanation for the contradictory findings documented in existing Chinese research, while also capturing emergent dynamics in contemporary migration contexts. The following section details the methodology through which these theoretical propositions are examined empirically.

### 3 | Methodology

#### 3.1 | Research Design

This research employs grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) to examine how internal migrants coordinate migration and fertility decisions through fertility norm navigation. This methodology is particularly suited to exploring undertheorised phenomena by enabling inductive theory development from empirical data rather than testing predetermined frameworks. Given that fertility norm mediation in migration-fertility coordination represents a relatively unexplored mechanism, this approach allows for the discovery of new theoretical insights while remaining grounded in participants' lived experiences. Life story interviews served as the primary data collection method because they capture individual-level coordination processes and enable integrated analysis of migration and fertility planning within unified biographical narratives, facilitating organic revelation of fertility norm navigation without directly prompting normative influences.

#### 3.2 | Research Site and Participants

Shenzhen was selected as the research site for its unique demographic composition. The city transformed from a fishing village with a population of 358,267 in 1979 to a major global metropolis with around 10.3 million inhabitants in 2010 with over 90% migrants (Wang 2022; Ye 2016). This migrant-dominated environment offers rich variation in migration trajectories and creates social contexts where interactions between spatial mobility and fertility behaviours are particularly visible.

Participant recruitment followed theoretical sampling principles integral to grounded theory, targeting maximum variation rather than statistical representation. The primary criterion focused on individuals aged over 27 – the average age for first childbirth in China (Zhang and Sheng 2023). This is considered to capture experiences of coordinating migration and fertility decisions during peak reproductive years and also to ensure participants had meaningful experience with fertility norm navigation. To maximise variation in fertility experiences and capture diverse perspectives on norm navigation, both male and female participants were included without restrictions on marital status, thereby incorporating married childless individuals, those in relationships, single participants, and individuals who have already become parents for comparative analysis.

Recruitment utilised snowball sampling through social media networks enabling access to diverse entry points across different social circles. Based on data saturation principles, 60 participants were included in the final analysis, see Table 1. The sample comprised 40 females (66.7%) and 20 males (33.3%), aged 27–37 years (mean age: 31.2). Of these, 46 (76.7%) were independent migrants to Shenzhen, whilst 14 (23.3%) were non-

**TABLE 1** | A Demographic Summary of Participants.

	<i>Number of cases (n)</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	20	33.3%
Female	40	66.7%
<b>Age (Year of Birth)</b>		
27–29 (Born after 1995)	24	40.0%
30–34 (Born between 1990–1995)	28	46.7%
35–37 (Born before 1990)	8	13.3%
<b>Education</b>		
Vocational School	3	5.0%
Bachelor's degree	30	50.0%
Master's degree	27	45.0%
<b>Marital and Parental Status</b>		
Married with Children	8	13.3%
Married without Children	25	41.7%
In a Relationship	22	36.7%
Single	5	8.3%
<b>Migrating Status in Shenzhen</b>		
Migrants	46	76.7%
Non-migrants	14	23.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	

migrants providing contextual understanding of destination fertility norms. The analysis focuses primarily on the migrants to examine migration-fertility coordination processes, with non-migrants serving as a comparison group. Given that life story interviews rely on participants' willingness and ability to articulate their experiences, the analysis draws particularly on narratives from participants who provided rich biographical details. Findings from these narratives were validated through comparison with across cases and assessment of theoretical consistency, ensuring that insights reflect broader patterns rather than individual idiosyncrasies.

#### 3.3 | Data Collection and Analysis

This study draws on data collected as part of a doctoral research project examining migration and fertility decision-making in contemporary China. Between March 2023 and September 2023, 66 life story interviews were conducted in Shenzhen, with 6 follow-up interviews for additional clarification. Interviews explored participants' experiences across childhood, education, career, migration, relationships, marriage, and family planning, allowing migration and fertility narratives to emerge naturally within biographical accounts. Interview lengths ranged from

one to over 3 h. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, with audio recording permitted. Participants' personal information has been anonymised using pseudonyms.

Data analysis followed grounded theory principles (Charmaz 2006), combining manual techniques with NVivo 14 software. The analytical process unfolded through three stages. First, open coding of individual narratives identified recurring themes related to migration decisions, fertility considerations, and references to social expectations or family pressure – capturing how participants discussed normative influences without being directly prompted. Second, focused coding examined how these themes clustered across participants, revealing patterns in how migrants described destination choices, responses to family pressure, and changes in fertility attitudes over time. Third, constant comparison across the 46 migrants identified the three norm-mediated processes – selection, disruption, and adaptation – as distinct yet interconnected mechanisms through which participants coordinated migration and fertility within their biographical trajectories. Throughout this process, attention was paid to how participants spontaneously invoked normative language – references to what was “expected,” “normal,” or “acceptable” in different contexts – as indicators of fertility norm navigation. The emergence of fertility norms as a unifying theme was not predetermined but developed inductively through iterative engagement with the data.

#### 4 | Findings

The empirical analysis reveals that fertility norms operate as a mediating mechanism not only within socialisation and assimilation – where normative processes are already explicit – but also within selection, disruption, and adaptation. Figure 1 illustrates how the three latter classical theories are extended through fertility norm mediation, which then enables the theoretical integration of all five theories. Drawing from life story interviews with migrants in Shenzhen, the following sections demonstrate three extensions to classical theory in turn: selection operates through strategic evaluation of normative environments, disruption functions by weakening norm enforcement through

geographic distance, and adaptation involves progressive internalisation of destination fertility norms. These findings demonstrate that each theory, whether originally framed in cultural, structural or demographic terms, operates in part through normative processes. This shared normative foundation, moreover, reveals how migration and fertility become coordinated within individual biographies rather than occurring as separate sequential events.

#### 4.1 | Selection: Strategic Mobility Choice in Fertility Norm Navigation

Classical selection theory argues that migrants represent non-random samples, with unobserved preferences revealed through destination choices (Lindstrom and Saucedo 2002; Ribe and Schultz 1980). This research extends selection theory by demonstrating that destinations choice involves not only matching individual preferences to location socioeconomic characteristics, but also strategic evaluation of fertility norm enforcement levels. Migrants actively seek destinations with weaker normative pressures, treating geographic mobility as a means of escaping restrictive fertility expectations. The empirical analysis reveals that this norm-based selection operates through three stages of increasing scope: (1) initial recognition of value conflicts when family members act as norm enforcers in origin contexts, (2) expanded awareness of community-level normative surveillance mechanisms, and (3) explicit incorporation of fertility norm considerations into destination choices. Each stage represents an expansion of what migrants recognise as subject to normative control – and correspondingly, what they seek to escape through migration.

Initially, migrants develop consciousness of normative constraints through experiencing value conflicts within their origin contexts. Deere, female and aged 33, illustrated this first stage when explaining her post-graduation city choice:

*My mum wanted me to return to her side... [...] But a major reason I don't want to be at home (city) is that I just don't want to be with my mum... We have quite big*

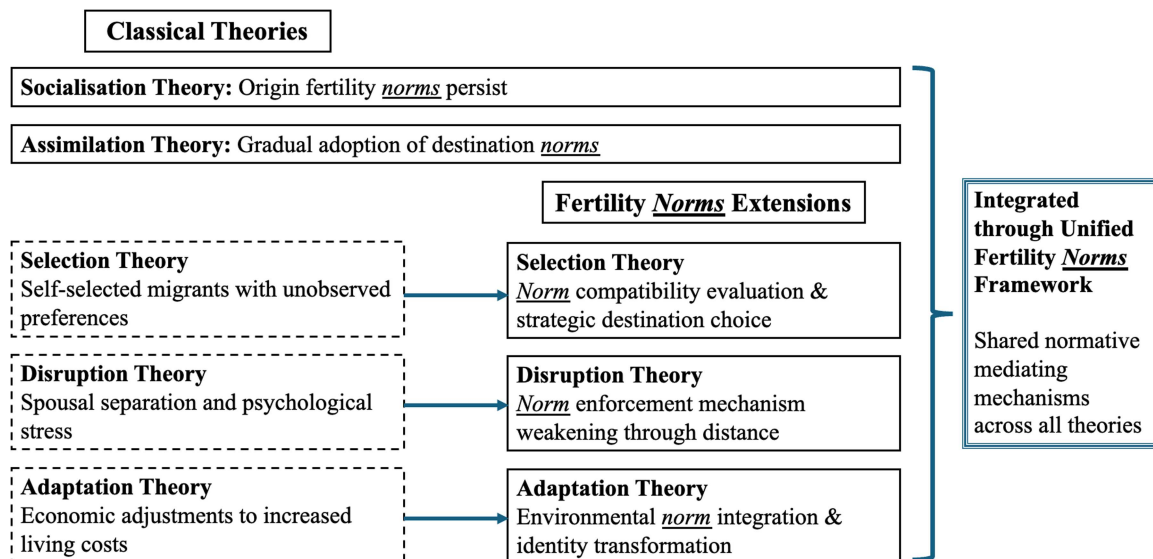


FIGURE 1 | Migration-Fertility Theoretical Extensions Through Fertility Norms Framework.

*differences in values. Plus, she's a teacher and particularly likes to control people.*

Despite her parents' comfortable financial position in their home city, Deere chose to migrate to Shenzhen independently. Her emphasis on "values" and "control" reveals that she understood her mother not merely as a caring parent but as someone who would enforce particular life course expectations – including, as she elaborated later in the interview, expectations about marriage timing and childbearing. This recognition that family relationships carry normative enforcement functions creates the cognitive foundation for using migration as an escape strategy – a form of selection mechanism based on normative environment valuation.

The second stage extends this recognition beyond family to the broader community. Meow's account illustrates this expansion:

*In Chaozhou (home city)... you get deeply trapped in various complex interpersonal networks... relatives and neighbours who evaluate your various life choices... I don't want my life to be judged and evaluated by others. So I wanted to find a place that's at an appropriate distance from Chaozhou to work.*

Meow's language – "trapped," "complex interpersonal networks," "evaluated" – reveals awareness that normative enforcement operates through community surveillance, not just parental control. Her strategic choice of "appropriate distance" shows sophisticated calculation: far enough to escape surveillance, but not so far as to sever family ties entirely. This expanded awareness shapes selection criteria: Meow evaluates potential destinations not only for economic opportunity but for their capacity to provide distance from community-level normative monitoring.

The third stage involves explicit consideration of fertility-specific pressures in migration decisions. Rain, a 31-year-old married woman without children, demonstrated this when explaining why she rejected a stable job offer in her hometown arranged through her father's network:

*I definitely don't want to go back home... I can only go home twice a year now, and my family is already pressuring me like this. If I were at home, what kind of situation would that be? I feel like I'd be lectured to death every day!*

Unlike Deere's general resistance to "control" or Meow's avoidance of being "evaluated," Rain explicitly identifies fertility pressure as the reason for her location decision. She rejected economic opportunity (the stable job) specifically to maintain geographic distance from fertility norm enforcement. This represents the fullest integration of fertility norm considerations into migration decision-making.

The three cases demonstrate a progression in the scope of normative awareness: from family (Deere) to community (Meow) to explicit fertility focus (Rain). This progression suggests that norm-based selection is not simply about individual fertility preferences – as classical selection theory implies – but

about strategic assessment of enforcement environments. Migrants evaluate not only whether a destination suits their preferences, but whether it offers protection from normative pressure. This extends classical selection theory by revealing that destination choice involves evaluation of normative enforcement intensity, not merely preference-destination matching. The mechanism connecting migration and fertility is thus not just self-selection based on existing preferences, but active navigation of normative landscapes.

## 4.2 | Disruption: Weakening Fertility Norm Enforcement Through Geographic Distance

Classical disruption theory emphasises how migration temporarily reduces fertility through spousal separation and psychological stress (Goldstein 1973; Lindstrom 2003). This research extends disruption theory by demonstrating that geographic distance also disrupts fertility norm enforcement. Unlike the temporary effects of separation stress, this normative disruption can be sustained. The analysis reveals interconnected ways: ideological disruption, which enables migrants to perceive normative processes that remain invisible to those continuously immersed in origin contexts, and physical disruption, which reduces the capacity of origin networks to enforce these norms. These pathways reinforce each other: ideological disruption creates cognitive space for questioning norms, while physical disruption removes the social pressure that would otherwise compel compliance.

Ideological disruption operates through the analytical distance that migration creates from pervasive fertility norm environments. This analytical distance enables migrants to perceive fertility norms that remain invisible to those continuously immersed in origin contexts. Rain's reflection on visiting her hometown illustrates this:

*It's not just about your parents. I even feel the same about peers. Sometimes, when I go back to my home city, I might see old classmates occasionally. It's really quite evident that during school days our ideas could still be aligned. But now, I feel like she is just like my mum, that same kind of traditional thinking pattern, having been in that environment for too long. Everyone around you is like that, and over time, they start to believe that such traditional thinking is correct. [...] I'm glad I didn't go back home!*

Rain's narrative reveals two stages of ideological disruption. First, spatial separation protected her from the gradual normative convergence affecting her peers – while former classmates adopted "traditional thinking patterns" through continuous exposure, migration created analytical distance. Second, the perceived "contrast" between her own views and those of her peers demonstrates her recognition that normative environments differ across places, and that continued immersion in origin contexts reinforces particular fertility expectations. Ideological disruption thus operates through the analytical distance that geographic separation creates: migrants might perceive normative processes that remain invisible to those continuously immersed within origin environments.

While ideological disruption may change how migrants perceive norms, physical disruption directly changes what norm enforcers can do. Geographic distance transforms fertility pressures from daily face-to-face confrontations into occasional remote communication – fundamentally reducing enforcement capacity. Yozi, a 32-year-old woman married 4 years before our interview, described this transformation: “No pressure really. It’s a bit annoying, but there’s no actual pressure. They just move their lips, just nagging, and you can brush it off.” When probed about her relaxed attitude, she explained: “Maybe it’s because we are now in Shenzhen, they are in Chengdu, somewhat like ‘the whip is too short to reach us’.”

The distinction between “annoying” and “actual pressure” described by Yozi captures the core mechanism of physical disruption. When family members lack physical proximity, their enforcement tools are limited to verbal communication – “just nagging” – which can be “brushed off.” The traditional idiom “the whip is too short to reach us” perfectly expresses how geographic distance neutralises enforcement capacity: the intent to enforce remains, but the means are insufficient.

Andrew, a 31-year-old man married for 3 years, articulated a similar transformation through another traditional idiom:

*It’s not important. For me... they don’t have... they only have discussion rights, not decision-making rights. I’m ‘mountains high and emperor far away,’ they’ve long given up on this matter.*

The distinction between “discussion rights” and “decision-making rights” reveals precisely how physical disruption alters family dynamics. Parents retain the ability to express preferences and opinions – they can still “discuss” – but they lose the capacity for continuous monitoring, daily pressure, or mobilising extended networks to apply social sanctions. Geographic distance does not sever family relationships but fundamentally changes the power dynamics within them, enabling migrants to maintain filial respect while asserting reproductive autonomy.

These two pathways reinforce each other. Physical distance creates the conditions for ideological disruption by removing migrants from continuous normative immersion, enabling the critical perspective Rain described. Simultaneously, ideological disruption – perceiving that normative expectations vary across contexts and are reinforced through immersion – makes it psychologically easier to resist the remaining enforcement attempts that occur through remote communication. Yozi can “brush off” her family’s nagging partly because she no longer accepts their fertility expectations as self-evidently correct.

Taken together, this extends classical disruption theory, which emphasises temporary fertility reduction through spousal separation or relocation stress. Norm-mediated disruption operates differently: rather than creating short-term obstacles to childbearing, it weakens the social pressure that might otherwise compel childbearing. The disruption identified here is not to fertility itself, but to the normative enforcement mechanisms that constrain reproductive decision-making. While selection operates at the point of migration decision, disruption effects are sustained thereafter: geographic distance continues to weaken enforcement capacity as long as spatial separation is maintained. Selection and disruption thus function as

interconnected mechanisms – migrants anticipate normative relief when choosing destinations, and disruption delivers on that anticipation through ongoing enforcement weakening.

### 4.3 | Adaptation: Progressive Integration of Urban Fertility Norms

Classical adaptation theory emphasises how migration to more developed areas creates economic pressures that encourage fertility reduction, focusing on how migrants gradually adjust fertility behaviour to accommodate increased living costs and child-rearing expenses through sustained exposure to new structural conditions (Bean and Swicegood 1985). While these structural factors are important, this research extends adaptation theory by demonstrating that migrants also adapt to destination fertility norms, not just economic conditions. This normative adaptation runs parallel to economic adjustment and often becomes intertwined with it: economic pressures create openings for normative change, and new norms provide frameworks for making sense of economically-driven decisions.

#### 4.3.1 | Normative Exposure and Reorientation

The first stage involves encountering destination fertility norms that differ from origin expectations, prompting cognitive reorientation. Uma, a 29-year-old woman, initially explained her delayed fertility plans through economic factors – career stability and housing – consistent with classic adaptation framework. However, when probed further, she emphasised that the change was fundamentally about perspective:

*But actually this perspective of mine... wasn’t something I had from the beginning. [...] I think it has a lot to do with the environment. After coming here, I feel like I should get my career sorted out first. Previously back at home, I might have thought that having children could happen anytime.*

Uma’s account suggests that economic pressures and normative exposure work together. The high costs of Shenzhen make the traditional fertility script – “having children could happen anytime” – economically impractical. But crucially, Uma encountered an alternative script in her new environment: one that prioritises career establishment before childbearing. She elaborated:

*After coming here, people develop stronger self-awareness... Back home, because that’s just how the environment is, people have one child, then two. But in Shenzhen, you see many people who don’t even want one child. It’s different. [...] You feel that many times you actually have to rely on yourself, not like before when you could still depend on parents and husband.*

Here Uma explicitly describes observing different fertility norms after migrating to Shenzhen: “many people who don’t even want one child.” This observation provides her with an alternative normative framework – one emphasising “self-

awareness” and “self-reliance” – that makes sense of her economically driven decision to delay childbearing. The economic pressure creates an opening; the observed norms provide a new script. This is adaptation to norms, not just to economic conditions.

#### 4.3.2 | Peer Validation and Legitimation

The second stage involves connecting with peers who share and validate alternative fertility orientations in the migrant city, transforming what might seem deviant into a legitimate choice. Meow, a 27-year-old female from Chaoshan where traditional fertility norms are particularly strong, described this transformation:

*In Chaoshan, you must keep giving birth until you produce a son. Then some people have obsessions with having both sons and daughters – after having a son, they must have a daughter. [...] But in Shenzhen, there are so many people around me who don't want children! [...] So I have absolutely no peer pressure... I feel I have many comrades around me!*

Meow's contrast between Chaoshan (“must keep giving birth until you produce a son”) and Shenzhen (“so many people who don't want children”) illustrates the dramatic normative distance between origin and destination. Her discovery of “comrades” – others who share her preference for childlessness – transforms this preference from a private deviation into a socially supported position.

The ability to find such “comrades” is not solely a matter of chance; it is a direct outcome of the selection processes discussed earlier. Migrants who chose Shenzhen to escape normative enforcement in origin contexts concentrate in the same destination, creating environments rich in peers with similar orientation. This concentration facilitates adaptation: exposure to like-minded others validates alternative fertility preferences, transforming what felt deviant in origin contexts into locally normal choices. For Meow, discovering that “so many people” share her preference for childlessness legitimises this orientation as a viable option rather than a personal failing. Peer validation thus accelerates normative adaptation by providing social confirmation that destination fertility norms – including acceptance of childlessness – are not merely tolerable but actively supported within her new social world.

#### 4.3.3 | Identity Reconstruction

The final and deepest stage of adaptation involves reconstructing identity in ways that naturalise destination fertility norms. Flyer, a 32-year-old female, exemplifies this process through her life story. This identity reconstruction begins with identity aspiration and culminates in identity internalisation, both of which are intertwined with place and migration. For many migrants like Flyer, moving to a first-tier city is part of a larger life project aimed at achieving a “better self” – one that is modern, autonomous, and successful. Her confident declaration during the interview, “Come on! I am a cosmopolitan girl!”, reveals this aspiration. This statement signifies a powerful embrace and

celebration of this new, desired self, associated with the metropolis.

She further elaborated:

*Women from first-tier cities, or economically independent women, have completely different views on marriage and relationships compared to women from basic levels of society.*

By distinguishing herself – “women from first-tier cities” from “women from basic levels of society”, she reconstructs her identity by categorising herself into the desired category indicated by her metropolitan living status achieved through migration. This process exemplifies the notion of identity as a “reflexive project,” which individuals actively construct and narrate by positioning themselves within the social world (Giddens 1991). Crucially, this project is deeply embedded in the spatial and cosmopolitan context where it unfolds, illustrating how identities are constructed in and through specific places like Shenzhen (Rose 1993). This self-categorisation reveals completed identity reconstruction: she has become a “cosmopolitan girl” for whom delayed childbearing and career prioritisation are not strategic choices but natural expressions of who she is. This identity transformation represents the endpoint of normative adaptation.

These three stages collectively demonstrate how adaptation operates as a comprehensive normative integration process extending classical adaptation theory beyond economic adjustment. At Stage 1 (Uma), economic pressures prompt reorientation and alternative norms provide new frameworks. At Stage 2 (Meow), peer validation legitimises alternative choices. At Stage 3 (Flyer), new norms become embedded in identity itself – they no longer feel like adaptations but like authentic self-expression. Flyer's delayed fertility plans are not accommodations to urban economic pressures but logical expressions of her cosmopolitan identity. In other words, this is an active process of normative integration rather than passive response to structural pressures.

This extension also clarifies the relationship between adaptation and assimilation. Both involve adopting destination norms, but they operate differently: assimilation describes gradual, often multigenerational convergence, while the adaptation process identified here is more compressed, more active, and more explicitly tied to economic triggers. Migrants do not passively absorb destination norms over time; they actively engage with alternative normative frameworks, seek validating peers, and reconstruct their identities. This active quality distinguishes normative adaptation from both classical economic adaptation (passive response to costs) and assimilation (gradual convergence).

## 5 | Discussion: Synthesising Migration–Fertility Coordination Across the Life Course

The preceding findings demonstrate that fertility norms operate as a mediating mechanism across selection, disruption, and adaptation. This consistent normative mediation represents more than a useful lens for understanding individual

mechanisms – it provides a unifying analytical framework capable of integrating fragmented classical theories. While socialisation and assimilation have always explicitly centred on normative processes, this study reveals that selection, disruption, and adaptation that have typically been framed in non-normative terms also operate through normative processes. Thus, fertility norms constitute a shared foundation underlying all five classical mechanisms.

Establishing fertility norms as a unifying framework enables a second contribution: understanding how selection, disruption, and adaptation connect within individual biographical trajectories, as illustrated in Figure 2. Selection operates before and during migration, as migrants evaluate destinations based on anticipated normative environments. Disruption operates from migration onward, weakening enforcement capacity and creating “protective space” for normative exploration – delivering on the normative relief that migrants anticipated during selection. Selection and disruption are thus tightly linked: selection involves choosing destinations based on anticipated enforcement levels, and disruption realises that anticipation through sustained weakening of origin norm pressure. Adaptation operates over sustained residence, as migrants progressively integrate destination fertility orientations – a process enabled by prior disruption of origin norm enforcement. This interconnected relationship – selection anticipates, disruption enables, adaptation transforms – reveals coordination that unfolds across the life course, with each mechanism creating conditions for the next.

This coordination operates against the backdrop of longer-term processes. As classical theories indicate, the origin fertility norms that migrants navigate were products of childhood socialisation; the destination norms they adopt may contribute to assimilation patterns among descendants over generations. Selection, disruption, and adaptation thus represent mechanisms through which individual migrants actively navigate between the longer-term normative contexts that socialisation and assimilation describe. Together, the classical five theories

on migration–fertility nexus have been integrated through the normative lens, and thus been coordinated within life course trajectories.

The life-course coordination revealed here challenges the sequential model dominating migration–fertility research, which assumes migration occurs and fertility subsequently adjusts. The norm-mediated framework suggests instead that migration and fertility are mutually constituted: fertility norm considerations shape migration decisions; migration creates conditions for norm renegotiation; and navigation continues throughout the migration experience as migrants negotiate between origin expectations, destination norms, and their own evolving preferences. This ongoing negotiation means that migration’s relationship to fertility cannot be reduced to a single causal parameter – it unfolds differently depending on how individuals navigate normative landscapes over time.

## 6 | Conclusion

This research addresses fundamental limitations in migration–fertility scholarship through both theoretical integration and methodological innovation. Drawing on 66 life-story interviews with internal migrants in Shenzhen, China, the study demonstrates how fertility norms operate as a unifying mechanism that resolves the theoretical fragmentation in migration–fertility nexus, while revealing the micro-level coordination processes underlying macro-level demographic patterns.

First, by integrating all five classical theories through fertility norms as illustrated in Figure 1, this study foregrounds the centrality of normative processes in the migration–fertility nexus. This responds to calls within demographic research to take norms seriously as explanatory mechanisms (Liefbroer and Billari 2010; Bernardi 2003). The findings suggest that future research on migration and fertility should explicitly engage with normative dimensions – examining not only economic pressures or demographic disruptions, but also how normative

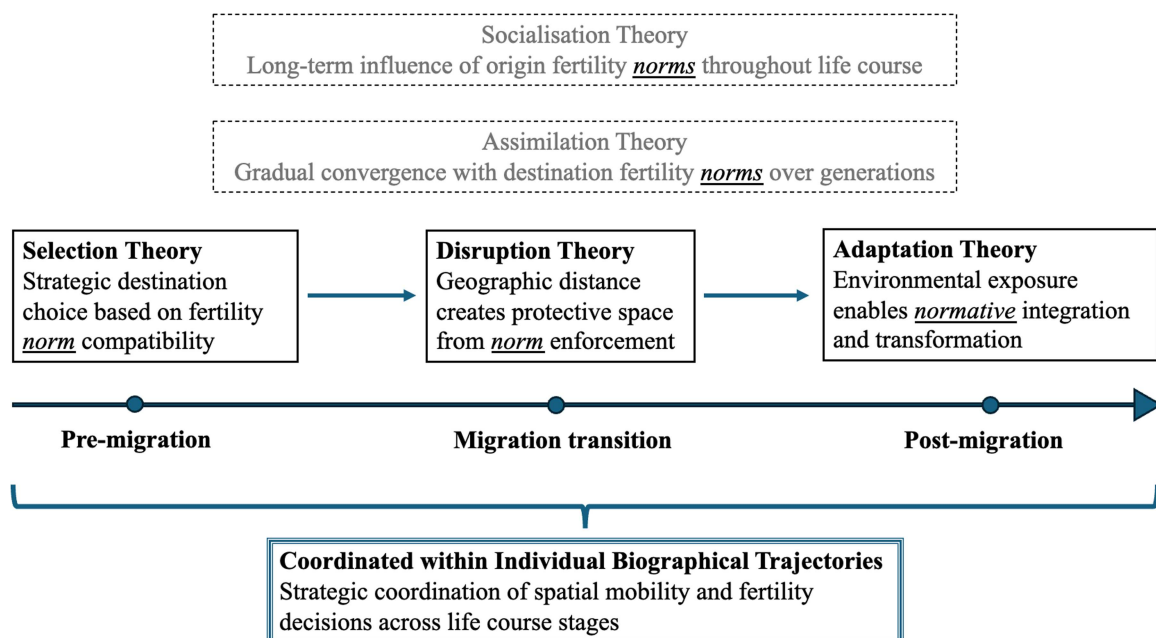


FIGURE 2 | Migration–Fertility Coordination within Individual Biographical Trajectories.

expectations are transmitted, enforced, and navigated across spatial contexts. The unifying framework also enables a shift in research orientation. Rather than testing which single mechanism best explains a given context, or adjudicating between competing theoretical predictions, researchers can examine how the five theories can operate dynamically through shared normative processes. This moves the field from mechanism-testing toward process-tracing, providing richer and more integrated perspectives in understanding migration-fertility relationships.

Second, by synthesising the five theories within life-course trajectories, this research reveals how spatial mobility and reproductive planning become interconnected within life-course trajectories through ongoing normative navigation, as shown in Figure 2. This reframing has both theoretical and methodological implications. Theoretically, it shifts analytical focus from measuring migration's effect on fertility to understanding how individuals coordinate both decisions simultaneously through normative navigation. For quantitative research, this suggests value in designs that can capture bidirectional influences – how fertility considerations shape migration decisions, and how migration experiences reshape fertility orientations – rather than treating migration solely as an independent variable predicting fertility outcomes. The life-course coordination revealed here challenges fundamental assumptions about demographic decision-making, positioning individuals as active navigators of normative landscapes rather than passive respondents to structural conditions.

For understanding fertility dynamics in contemporary China specifically, this research reveals the agentic processes underlying reproductive decision-making among migrants. Migrants who move from restrictive origin environments to cities like Shenzhen experience weakened normative enforcement and encounter diverse fertility orientations, gaining expanded reproductive autonomy – the capacity to make decisions aligned with their own preferences rather than externally imposed expectations. From this perspective, the significance of migration lies not in raising or lowering fertility per se, but in creating conditions where individuals can exercise genuine choice. In an era where China's fertility rate continues to decline despite policy encouragement (Zhang et al. 2025; Chen 2023), these findings suggest that policies relying on normative pressure may prove counterproductive. Migrants increasingly resist external expectations and assert reproductive autonomy. Thus, environments supporting diverse fertility choices – where those who want children can have them and those who do not are equally respected – may better serve both individual wellbeing and sustainable demographic outcomes.

This study's design also suggests several directions for future research. The focus on Shenzhen as a research site, whilst enabling rich insights into a migrant-majority context, represents a specific urban environment; future research could examine whether similar coordination processes operate in other societies with different migrant compositions. Additionally, this research prioritised theoretical development by treating diverse migration origins as representing movement from less developed to highly developed areas, rather than distinguishing specific rural-urban migration patterns. Future research could examine how the fertility norms framework applies differently across distinct migration typologies, exploring whether rural-to-

urban versus urban-to-urban migrants navigate normative differences through similar coordination processes or whether the intensity of normative variation shapes these mechanisms differently. International comparative studies could usefully examine how the fertility norms framework applies to other contexts of large-scale internal migration in rapidly urbanising societies. Meanwhile, longitudinal research following migrants over extended periods could investigate how selection, disruption, and adaptation interact with the longer-term longitudinal processes of socialisation and assimilation within individual trajectories.

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### Ethics Statement

This research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford (reference number: SOC\_R2\_001\_C1A\_22\_36) on 1st January 2023. The study was conducted in accordance with the approved protocol for carrying out interviews, obtaining participants' consent, and handling data. All participants were provided with information about the research aims and procedures, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from the data, and pseudonyms are used throughout this article. Data management followed the University of Oxford's Data Protection Act guidelines, with secure handling and storage arrangements for all sensitive information.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study consist of in-depth life story interviews containing intimate personal information. Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available. Research participants consented to the use of anonymised quotes in research publications, which have been included in this article. Further inquiries about the methodological approach can be directed to the author.

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