

Sign in

Support the Guardian

Fund independent journalism with \$5 per month

Advertisement

Taiwan

The power of dragon babies: could an auspicious year boost China's ailing birthrate?

One expert predicts an extra million babies to be born in China in 2024, the Year of the Dragon, with all the pressure and expectation that come with it



📷 China's efforts to boost its birthrate have had little impact, but perhaps the Year of the Dragon in the zodiac calendar will help. Photograph: Andy Wong/AP

Helen Davidson, Amy Hawkins, and Chi Hui Lin

Fri 9 Feb 2024 14.00 EST

Last week in Taiwan, a well-known obstetrician-gynaecologist posted a public service announcement on Facebook, urged aspiring parents not to waste any time. [Dr Chih Chun Chen](#), a director of the Eugene Postpartum Nursing Care Center, told young couples to put 8 May in their calendar if they wanted to give birth to a dragon baby.

“Sowing should be completed by May 15 of this year at the latest,” Chen said. “You have to work hard during the New Year!”

This weekend marks the start of the Year of the Dragon in the zodiac calendar. The dragon is the only mythical creature among the 12 that the calendar cycles through, and is considered the most auspicious, with those born under its sign considered destined for success.

This year there is an extra layer of significance, as many countries in Asia are experiencing [declining birthrates](#), leading to an ageing population and predictions of dire economic consequences. Singapore’s prime minister, Lee

Hsien Loong, said in his lunar new year message: “Now is as good a time as any for young couples to add a ‘little dragon’ to your family.”

China, home to almost a fifth of the world’s people, recently entered a population decline and government efforts to boost the birthrate with financial incentives and other policies of encouragements have had little impact.

Hank, a dragon baby born in 2000 in a small town in Shaanxi province, north-central China, recalls feeling a certain pressure growing up. “I am the only dragon boy. So in my father’s family, they have really high expectations from me,” he says from the UK, where he is now a university student.

Previous dragon years have seen spikes in the number of births in places where observance of the zodiac calendar runs deep, such as China, [Taiwan](#), Hong Kong and Singapore. A Taipei-based midwife recalls 2012, when a dragon year baby boom filled hospital beds, forcing many women to give birth in hallways.



📷 Workers set up stores for the temple fair ahead of the Chinese lunar new year at Ditan Park in Beijing on Sunday. Photograph: Andy Wong/AP

[A 2020 research paper](#) by economists Prof Naci H Mocan and Han Yu found clear differences in educational outcomes and even height among Chinese

children born in a dragon year. They already knew the dragon year could bring a spike in births, but Mocan says they had expected that would lead to worse outcomes for the children.

“As economists, we thought of course the cohort is going to be larger, schools and classrooms will be more crowded, student-teacher ratios will be higher, so there should be a negative effect on learning in reality,” Mocan tells the Guardian.

“Then when these kids go to the job market all at the same time there is more competition.”

But instead Mocan and Yu found higher test scores among middle school students, those sitting China’s high-pressure college entrance exam, and higher graduation rates. Similarly, girls born in a dragon year were found to be less short than male peers, on average. The researchers found that parents of dragon year children invested more time and money - and in the case of the taller daughters, food - to ensure they reached their zodiac-dictated potential.

“They even protect their kids from house chores. The upshot is dragon parents have higher expectations of their kids, which motivates them to invest more in their kids, and push them more,” Mocan says.

“So these self fulfilling expectations are important - they become a cultural norm. There is no scientific or biological reason [that dragon children are more successful]. But it tells you the power of cultural beliefs.”

‘I am the dragon, so I should ... take on bigger challenges’

William Yang, a Taiwanese foreign correspondent, says he felt social and cultural pressure to succeed as a dragon baby even though his family didn’t fully ascribe to the superstition. “Like, you are aware that my zodiac means good fortune and I’m going to have a big life and there’s a super future ahead of me because I’m a dragon and I’m better than all the other zodiacs,” he laughs.

“So maybe that subconsciously influenced the way that I decided to pursue some stuff in life ... Because I am the dragon, so I should go explore, try these big things, take on bigger challenges.”

Not everyone is superstitious. Lu Yuan, an educational consultant in Hangzhou, is pregnant with her second baby, who will be born in the early days of the dragon year. She is having a dragon baby because her eldest is four years old and in kindergarten, so “the burden of parenting has become

lighter, and I feel that now is the time to welcome a little one,” she says. “This is the main reason. I didn’t consider the influence of the Chinese zodiac sign at all.”



📷 Observers have found dragon parents have higher expectations of their children, which motivates greater investment. Photograph: Wu Hao/EPA

Lu believes that auspicious dragons will have little effect on the rising number of people who are choosing not to have children. “But if someone is planning to have a child, they may choose to have one this year because of the zodiac sign.”

The evidence of another baby boom happening in 2024 is, so far, anecdotal and circumstantial, but there is a sense, or perhaps a hope, that zodiac superstitions are still strong enough to drive one.

Zhai Zhenwu, the president of the China Population Society and a professor at Renmin University of China, told state media he expected a spike in births. Mocan expects an extra million babies to be born in China in 2024. Social media discussions in China frequently note an apparent increase in pregnant friends, while state media reported an increase in sales of pregnancy-related products, beginning late last year.

Babies are still expensive, even dragon ones

Meanwhile in Taiwan, the Eugene Postpartum Nursing Care Center says bookings for birth inducements and monthly checkups are higher than in previous years.

But the issues driving people to remain child-free - high costs of living, stagnating wages and career prospects, and entrenched gender expectations - are still problems.

“Does having a child in the Year of the Dragon make it less expensive to raise them?” asked one Chinese commenter on Weibo this week, while others accused officials and experts of pushing predictions related to the zodiac year because they had run out of policy ideas.

“It is predicted that next year experts will say: The snake is a little dragon, which is also very auspicious,” said one.

Hank’s parents planned to have a dragon baby, but he reckons that people of his generation won’t be so influenced by traditional customs. “Young people around me are under great pressure,” he says. “Maybe we don’t starve to death, but the space for us to do anything is kind of narrow”.
