

Could the Year of the Dragon bring the baby boom that Asia needs? Maybe.

By [Lily Kuo](#) and [Lyric Li](#)

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TAIPEI, Taiwan — Governments across East Asia — from China and Taiwan to Japan and South Korea — have been trying to persuade women to have more babies. It’s getting existential: China is fast running out of the workers needed to power its manufacturing-focused economy and is forecast to lose as many as 200 million workers — or the entire working population of the United States — by 2050.

Their efforts are failing. Birthrates continue to fall. But some are hoping for a baby boom, or even a baby boomlet, in the year ahead as Saturday marks the start of a Lunar New Year and the dawn of the Year of the Dragon.

According to Chinese astrology — a nearly two-millennia-old system with believers casual and fervent across Asia and in Chinese communities around the world — the dragon is the most auspicious zodiac animal.

As the only mythical creature of the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac, it is considered divine and powerful. Many believe children born in the Year of the Dragon are more likely to be successful and fortunate all their lives.

Under the system, which assigns traits to each animal, some years are less popular, like that of the tiger (too fierce), the goat (too timid) or the snake (seen as manipulative and cunning). The Year of the Golden Pig, which has a decades-long cycle, has also led to baby booms. Golden Pigs are said to have lifelong comfort and wealth.

But no year is as sought after as the dragon, associated with intelligence, confidence and ambition. Couples opt for in vitro fertilization or schedule Caesarean deliveries to ensure their children are born in time — or even ask doctors to delay deliveries. School class sizes surge during dragon years, often requiring extra cohorts.

Even heads of state weigh in. On Friday, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged citizens to “[add a ‘little dragon’](#)” to their families.

The superstition is not entirely baseless. According to [a 2019 study](#) using data from China, those born during a dragon year were more likely to score higher on university entrance exams and to have a college education. Girls in the cohort studied were also more likely to be taller.

But the reason, the study concluded, had nothing to do with the cosmos. It was the extra time and money that parents spend on those children.

“People think that these dragon kids are special and they want to have special kids, and when they have these kids, they invest in them and expect great things from them. And this makes them successful, and the cycle continues,” said Naci Mocan, a professor of economics at Louisiana State University and one of the authors of the study. “That’s why this has been going on for centuries and generations.”

In China, where the Lunar New Year is the most important annual holiday, authorities are hoping this age-old belief will produce a needed spike in births. Hospitals across China have been sending out timetables and tips instructing couples when to conceive to have a dragon baby.

“Hurry up and seize these few months to prepare for a baby scientifically,” read one notice from the Huantai Maternity and Child Healthcare Hospital in Shandong province.

Zhai Zhenwu, an adviser to the National Health and Family Planning Commission, told the Chinese outlet Times Finance in January that the “very clear” astrological preferences of Chinese citizens meant there was “hope” for a higher fertility rate this year.

The world’s second-largest economy is on the verge of a population crisis caused by decades of restricting family sizes. Even as China loosened controls — as of 2021, all married couples are allowed to have three children — and offered subsidies and incentives, younger generations are eschewing marriage and children.

In 2023, new births fell for a seventh year in a row, to 9.02 million — about half of what it was in 2017. At this rate, China’s population of 1.4 billion is expected to decrease to just over half a billion by 2100.

“The belief that the Year of the Dragon brings good luck may help some,” said Huang Wenzheng a demographer and senior fellow of the Center for China and Globalization in Beijing. “If the government can think of more targeted ways to encourage fertility, it could make as much as a 0.01 percent difference in the fertility rate,” he said.

Both Huang and Mocan believe the dragon year could boost new births by about 1 million, to account for a total of 10 million for the year. (Birthrates have seen spikes in previous dragon years, by almost 300,000 in 2000 and 900,000 in 2012, according to Mocan’s study.)

One clue is an uptick in marriages, a trend researchers have seen before previous dragon years. During the first three quarters of 2023, the number of marriages in China increased 4.5 percent compared to the same period a year before and is expected to reach 7 million for the year, up from 6.8 million in 2022.

Sherry Yang, a consultant who connects Chinese women to fertility centers in Kazakhstan, says she has gotten more queries than she expected in the past year given the state of the Chinese economy. One couple’s goal was to have three dragon children. They did in vitro fertilization and will have triplets in August.

But she attributes most of the demand to the pandemic having forced many to put their lives on hold.

“A lot of people haven’t been able to get pregnant these three years. With the health codes and all the rules, it was just too much hassle,” she said, referring to China’s strict “zero covid” restrictions that tracked residents’ health and whereabouts on their phones.

Elsewhere in Asia, countries are expecting a dragon baby boomlet. Postpartum-care nanny Teresa Tan, whose company works in Singapore and Malaysia, said she is booked through September, with an increase in bookings of about 40 percent compared to last year. “There’s definitely been an impact.”

Cathy Tsai, an adviser at Infancix, a postpartum-care center in Taipei, Taiwan, said that over the past few months, clients have been booking rooms as soon as they are seven or eight weeks pregnant. Most years, mothers wait until about 12 weeks to book.

Mak Ling-ling, a well-known fortune teller in Hong Kong, said she has also gotten more inquiries, including some from female celebrities she would not name, about having children this year.

“Everyone is a little rushed trying to have a dragon baby,” she said. “The zodiac still has a big influence on Chinese people’s birthrates, but the issue now is that the economy is bad.”

Even more than the zodiac, the economy is likely the main factor in affecting the birthrate. Without major improvements in China’s slowing economy or major overhauls, birthrates probably won’t improve dramatically.

“Research suggests that zodiac birth timing tends to affect when rather than how many children families eventually have, and hence may not help to solve the problem of low fertility,” said Poh Lin Tan, a senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, referring to studies done in Hong Kong.

Huang, the demographer in Beijing, said Chinese policymakers have not been ambitious enough. “There are no major incentives at the national level, and local governments are relying on small sums of money to provide subsidies, which is no use at all,” he said.

Still, age-old beliefs are hard to shake. Han Yu, an economist at the University of Memphis in Tennessee who worked on the 2019 study linking parents’ expectations and the performance of dragon children, would also like to have a child this lunar year.

He may be partial. He was also born in the Year of the Dragon and remembers feeling a little special growing up. “I just feel it’s cool to have a dragon baby, especially if the father is a dragon,” he said.

Regine Cabato in Manila contributed to this report.