

Bosses pay women to freeze eggs

China

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Hundreds of women in managerial roles in China are being offered the opportunity to freeze their eggs, as the country grapples with increasing numbers choosing a career over children.

China's largest travel agency, called Ctrip, will offer its female employees in middle to senior management roles from 100,000 yuan to 2 million yuan (£11,000 to £230,000) to freeze their eggs, which executives hope will enable women to postpone having children.

The company hopes the women will help avert a growing crisis caused by a shrinking, and ageing, population. More than 500 employees are eligible to apply for the money, the company said, and the money can be spent at hospitals in China or overseas.

Chinese law does not allow single women to have their eggs frozen. Meanwhile, married women must meet restrictive criteria, such as a cancer diagnosis or inability to have the eggs immediately fertilised, before they can have their eggs extracted and frozen for future use. Single women at Ctrip will be able to travel abroad for the treatment, the company said, effectively circumventing the ban.

"China faces long-term demographic issues. Only by encouraging people to have more babies can China avoid the ticking time bomb of a shrinking population and continue its rapid growth and innovative drive," James Liang, chairman and co-founder of Ctrip, told *The Times* yesterday.

China's workforce is forecast to shrink to 424 million in 2050, from 776 million last year. Liaoning, a north-east province that has been losing residents, has proposed benefits in taxation and housing to tempt women to have children. It hopes to double the birth rate to 1.8 children per woman by 2030.

Beijing relaxed its restrictive birth policy in 2016, allowing all Chinese families to have two children. Mr Liang argues that Chinese families need to have three children if China is to sustain its present population. Mr Liang's company reimburses taxi fees for pregnant women and gives them lounge chairs in the office.

Egg-freezing became widely known in China in 2015 when Xu Jinglei, an actress and director, admitted having the procedure in the United States. Before that, Chinese had generally shied away from discussing reproductive options.

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