

## **Towards a better understanding of past fertility regimes: Ideas and practice of controlling family size in Chinese history**

The predominant view about past fertility regime can be summarized as follow. The cost of children was relatively low; there was no intentional birth control; and therefore fertility was high. 'Preventive check' existed in some European countries, where the relatively low fertility was often a result of postponing marriage or increasing number of people not marrying, which was more likely to occur under unfavourable economic conditions.

There are also three inter-related beliefs about fertility regimes in historical China. They are: a. Fertility was very high in Chinese history; b. There was no intentional fertility control in the past; and c. The Chinese wanted to have as many children or sons as possible. While there have been some debates on the issues in recent years, our understanding of past fertility patterns is still rather limited. Many scholars still hold the view that deliberate control of family size or fertility never exist in the past.

This paper, based on my own historical study and that undertaken by other researchers, first summarizes recent findings about fertility patterns in historical China. In comparison with their European counterparts, China's married women had lower fertility. While they married young, they started childbearing at relatively late ages. Their inter-birth interval was also relatively long. In addition, they stopped childbearing at younger ages.

In section two, the paper provides new evidence of people deliberately regulating their family size in the past. The discussion concentrates particularly on the phenomenon of '*Sheng Zi Bu Ju*', which literarily means having sons or children but not bringing them up and was recorded widely during the *Song* Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD). The evidence shows that as early as one thousand years ago, many couples wanted to have two sons and one daughter. Some of them could intentionally control their family size, though this was largely achieved through infanticide.

Following that, section three examines China's pronatalist and antinatalist beliefs as well as people's desired family size. It reveals that during the *Song* period, a considerable number of people wanted to '*Ji Chan Yu Zi*' or '*Ji Chan Shou Kou*', both phrases literately mean that 'having children according to their ability and wealth'. Economic hardship, avoiding further division of family property and expensive dowry were the major reasons for such behaviour. In other words, people's decisions of controlling their family size or reproduction stemmed directly from the consideration of their long-term economic interests.

Section four summarizes antinatalist views expressed by Chinese officials and scholars over the last two thousand years. Its shows that while traditional Chinese culture might have been dominated by pronatalist ideas, antinatalist viewpoints have existed since ancient time. Chinese officials and scholars not only worried about the increasing population pressure, but also understood that population increase could be controlled through postponing marriage, lowering

the proportion marrying, preventing women from getting pregnant, limiting the number of births, and widely using contraception and abortion (they actually made such suggestions). In order to achieve the goal of limiting population growth, they wanted to use not only laws and stringent government regulations, but also economic means such as rewards and extra tax payments.

The last section of the paper on the basis of the reported findings discusses a number of related issues and challenges the long established view that in pre-transitional societies the demand for children was high and human reproductive strategies aimed at maximizing the number of surviving offspring.