

Prudence and Pressure:
Reproduction and Human Agency in Europe and Asia, 1700–1900

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This paper summarizes the arguments and major findings from the volume *Prudence and Pressure: Reproduction and Human Agency in Europe and Asia, 1700–1900*, published in 2010 by MIT Press. The book, which is the second volume published by the Eurasian Population and Family History Project (EAP), offers a systematic and truly comparative examination of human reproduction and social organization in preindustrial communities from both ends of the Eurasian landmass. In contrast with previous studies of historical fertility that focused primarily on European experiences, the volume seeks to develop an Eurasian perspective.

Using individual-level longitudinal data drawn from local population registers in populations from five countries/regions in preindustrial Europe and East Asia, and employing techniques of event-history analysis, this study uncovers the dynamic mechanisms of reproductive behavior under changing household and local economic circumstance. Constructing largely identical variables using micro-level data drawn from comparable population registers in southern Sweden, eastern Belgium, central Italy, northeastern Japan, and northeastern China during the 18th and 19th centuries, we examine the relationship between reproductive behavior and social and economic context in comparative perspective, accounting for the reproductive effects of different levels of factors: (i) individual demographic, marriage and family characteristics; (ii) household and kinship context including socioeconomic status, household structure, and coresident kin; (iii) community-level economic conditions; and (iv) social institutions and culture by comparing the study populations locating in five countries/regions in different parts of Europe and East Asia.

This comparative study consists of three parts: (1) contexts and models, (2) comparative geographies, and (3) local histories. The first part—consisting of three chapters—lays out the theoretical framework and analytical model employed by this comparative study. The second part, consisting of three chapters, summarizes and discusses the findings from the comparative analyses of the reproductive effects of household conditions and local economic conditions, as well as postnatal reproductive

controls, respectively. The third part consists of five chapters, each of which presents the results of country/region-specific analyses.

The main finding of the study is that reproductive behavior and rationales were remarkably similar, despite many differences between the East and the West. We found the expected East-West differences in marriage behavior with our European study populations characterized by late and less marriage while our East Asian populations by early and universal marriage. Our comparative analysis also identified new differences in reproductive rationales between the East and the West: in our European study sites the socioeconomic status of an individual or a household tended to be the main resource that enabled or compelled an individual woman/couple to take actions regarding reproduction while in our northeastern Asian study populations a position of a woman/couple occupied within her/their family and household largely defined the range of reproductive choices. This suggests the different reproductive consequences of individual-oriented societies in the West versus collective-oriented societies in the East.

On the other hand, however, our comparative analyses also revealed not only that the overall levels of reproduction were remarkably comparable in our study populations in preindustrial Eurasia, but also that women and couples in these study sites exercised similar prudence in reproductive behavior within marriage. Hence, we refute the previously held characterization that “prudence,” fewer children due to late marriage, was more characteristic of reproduction in the preindustrial West while “pressure,” high mortality (especially infant mortality and infanticide) due to over-population, was more prevalent in the historical East. This study offers ample evidence that prudence *as well as* pressure existed in all preindustrial societies under study, suggesting that preindustrial reproduction was governed by human agency as much as by human biology.