

The Effects of Polygamy and Prohibition of Women's Remarriage on the Net Reproduction Rate: 1600-1900

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<Extended abstract>

The age of marriage and marriage rates are good examples of birth control mechanism in Europe. Generally, lower marriage age and higher marriage rates lead to higher birth rates. In China and Japan where almost every woman gets married and the age of marriage is 5-10 years younger than in Europe, however, the birth rates is lower than that of Europe. The birth rate of South Korea is also lower than that of Europe. Despite this, only the fertility control function of the next generation has been mentioned based on the positive check such as the custom of female infanticide as a fertility control mechanism in East Asia. There are few full-scale researches on fertility control mechanisms.

This study set out to demonstrate empirically that marriage customs such as polygamy and prohibition of women's remarriage functioned as fertility control mechanisms based on the genealogy of Korea. Unlike China and Japan, Korea did not practice the female infanticide as a general custom. Previous studies on the custom of female infanticide in Japan and China began by finding grounds in orally transmitted myths and customs in the society. There were no such orally transmitted myths and customs in Joseon(traditional Korea). Despite this, however, the birth rate of Joseon was lower than that of Europe, which suggests that there was another fertility control mechanism in Joseon.

Joseon was a monogamy society officially, but men were allowed to have concubines. In

practice, Joseon was a polygamy society. It is well known that polygamy lowers the birth rate. *Gyeonggukdaejeon*, the Great National Code published in 1485, contains restrictions on remarried women and their families. As a consequence, men would generally remarry after their spouses passed away. The law imposed many disadvantages on the families and descendents of remarried women, practically putting a ban on the remarriage of women. These customs led to the shortage of women. When male spouses passed away before women, they were not allowed to remarry, which affected their fertility. This means that the mortality of male spouses had impacts on birth rates.

The present study demonstrated empirically that the effects of this marriage system and custom and the mortality of male spouses on birth based on genealogy. Since genealogy contains information about the dates when husbands and wives were born and passed away and also information about the number of female spouses and their children, it can be used to calculate the period when female spouses remained as widows after the death of their husbands and the number of their children. Genealogy records only the family members that lived through after marriage, which means the calculated number of children in genealogy refers not the actual birth rate but the reproduction rate. The present study thus focused on 200,000 people whose records were found in genealogy since 1600, calculating the birth rate by the marriage type and analyzing the effects of male spouses' mortality on the net reproduction rate.
