

Frequency of Intercourse in China and its Implications for Historical Fertility

Long abstract for submission to the PAA 2005 Annual Meeting

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In Arthur Wolf's famous thesis on the Westermarck hypothesis, the low fertility of minor marriages in colonial Taiwan is attributable to sexual aversion between spouses (Wolf 1995). In James Lee and Wang Feng's interpretation of low marital fertility in late imperial China, childbearing is held in check by "sexual restraint" (Lee and Wang 1999). Common to both theories is the centrality of coital frequency. If coital frequency was unusually low in late imperial China, it would go some way towards resolving the debate over low marital fertility observed in the pre-transition regime (Wolf 2001; Campbell, Wang, and Lee, 2002). But because no Qing headman or lineage elder ever saw fit to record frequency of intercourse, all such theorizing rests on circumstantial evidence alone. But this is not the end of the story, because there is an option: to interrogate contemporary sources. These include the earliest major source of systematic data on coital frequency in China, the series of surveys conducted in 1985 and 1987 collectively known as the "In-Depth Fertility Surveys" (IDFS), with a total sample of over 40,000 women, of which nearly 24,000 were rural. They also include the China Health and Family Life Survey (CHFLS), conducted in 1999-2000, and containing detailed data about the sexual practice of over 1,500 women. From these and several other contemporary sources we are able to develop a strong and consistent account of Chinese frequency of intercourse in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Chinese marriage and family have scarcely been static over the past century. Can twentieth century behavior really provide any clue to sexual practice in an earlier era? It is possible because on virtually every front imaginable, change should have promoted higher coital rates. A revolution in public health vanquished epidemics and most diseases

of youth and middle age. An economic revolution eliminated famine and provided basic welfare for most. A family revolution undermined patriarchal authority and set a trajectory towards a more companionate form of marriage. Finally, the market reforms of the 1980s have opened China to a wave of romantic and sexual imagery, from Teresa Teng to Zhou Weihui. None of these trends would be expected to depress the rate of sexual congress within marriage.

But there is another reason why we might expect higher frequency of intercourse in the 1980s than in an earlier era, for if the theory advanced by James Lee and Wang Feng is correct, the spread of modern contraceptive technology to every home in China would release a constraint on sexuality within marriage. They argue that “The low fertility and long birth intervals of Chinese couples in the past were at least in part the result of their ability and even willingness to regulate coital frequency” (1999:91). If “marital restraint” was intentionally used to limit childbearing in the past, then the advent of modern contraception, widely available since the 1970s and universally so in the mid-1980s, would completely remove any such restraint. These reasons taken together suggest that coital frequency in the 1980s and 1990s should be, if anything, higher than in earlier times.

One might object, however, that other things have changed too. Patterns of marital disruption, occasioned by sojourning or widowhood, for example, could also affect coital rates, and these have assuredly changed. We need to take account of these effects, so we distinguish between the rates of coitus practiced by co-resident spouses, and the rates that include couples affected by marital disruptions of any kind. We focus on a measure of coital frequency that is independent of such disruptions, and we go further than this, because the IDFS and CHFLS data also permit us to purge our measure of the effects of age and marital duration, temporary spousal absence, diseases that preclude sexual relations, pregnancy, and the post-partum period. We are able to measure Chinese coital frequency net of important compositional effects.

Data across several surveys show consistently that Chinese coital frequency is remarkably low in international comparative perspective. Survey data also permit examination of explanations for low frequency. Contrary to the marital restraint hypothesis, we find that sterilized couples at any marital duration have lower frequency

than unsterilized couples. And we find that belief in the deleterious health effects of intercourse—still very prevalent even among Chinese urbanites—is related to lower frequency of intercourse. On the assumption that low coital frequency typified Chinese marriage in earlier centuries, we apply Bongaarts and Potter’s model of the proximate determinants of fertility to estimate the mean expected birth interval. The results suggest that low frequency of intercourse and lengthy breastfeeding customs are together sufficient to explain the low marital fertility rates observed in the late imperial period.

References

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