Sex selection and family patterns across Vietnam

Valentine Becquet and Christophe Z Guilmoto

IN GENERAL, while there are many local explanations for the emergence of prenatal sex selection, a more solid understanding is needed. The factors to the combination of three factors: supply, demand and fertility decline. The supply dimension pertains to the introduction of affordable prenatal diagnosis technologies such as ultrasound, which allow parents to opt for abortion according to the gender of the fetus. The demand factor corresponds to the biased gender valuation system, usually manifested by a strong preference for sons over daughters. The preference for male offspring is clearly linked to the preponderance of the patrilineal kinship system and to living arrangements, farm labour, inheritance systems, and support to the elderly. The third factor pertains to the declining fertility level since the proportion of parents with no son automatically increases when the average number of children reduces.1

In Vietnam, it was only after the diffusion of the modern ultrasound technology in the country in 2005 that there was a rise in the sex ratio at birth – from 105 male births per 100 female births, to 112 today. As it is elsewhere, the sex ratio at birth in Vietnam tends to be higher among the higher socioeconomic groups and for higher order births. And what is more striking in Vietnam is the very unequal distribution of birth masculinity across the country: some regions such as the highland Central Highlands have a sex ratio levels close to normal, while the masculinity of birth is more pronounced in the Niên Nam, a testament as recipient of the main house for worshipping. These daughters are either legally adopted and raised by the couple, or designated in a testament as recipient of the main house for worshipping. In such situations, the last daughter will therefore inherit most of the family properties: house, animals, possessions, and farmlands.

Thus, in this area, marked features of gender preference, but biased this time towards girls. For instance, it is considered essential to have at least one daughter, preferably as the first child. It is seen as an ‘insurance’ and it reduces the pressure on the gender of future children. Interviewed mothers and fathers with only sons attest to being teased by friends and family during parties for not having daughters. However, many mentioned a solution to the absence of a female offspring: adopting a girl – usually a niece from the wife’s family clan – who will inherit the property and take care of [them].” These daughters are either legally adopted and raised by the couple, or designated in a testament as recipient of the main house for worshipping. “I have many nieces in town, but when I get older, I will consider whom I will give everything to”, explained the father of 3 sons in An Phuc village.

Another interesting feature of this society relates to the terminology used to designate grandchildren and children in the Vietnamese language: ‘n’ means interior/domestic and ‘ngo’ means exterior. For the Kinh people, ‘ngôngdôi’ and ‘chúndôi’ refer respectively to paternal grandparents and grandsons. But among Chams, these terms are used to name maternal grandparents and grand children instead. These are clear signs of a matrilineal kinship system. Yet, they are often limited by severe taboos. For instance, the family name is only transmitted from father to son, clan leaders are exclusively men and while ancestor worship is performed for family members in the wife’s lineage, it is the husband who is in fact in charge of the rituals.

Regional characteristics of Vietnam's macro-regions

The Cham people of the Thu province in central Vietnam is an interesting example of a mix influence kinship pattern. The Cham now represents only 12% of the population in this area, but it used to be the dominant group till the beginning of the 19th century. The majority of the Cham practice the Bön religion, which combines Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist influences. In their villages, most of the newlywed couples reside with the wife’s family until they can afford to build new houses. According to the elders, “the tradition here is that the woman gets married to the man, not the other way around”. It is the future bride who decides the future courses. There are almost no contemporary anthropological studies on gender systems in other parts of Vietnam. More generally, qualitative studies fail to provide any measurable indicator of the actual intensity of son preference.

Absence of a son

For this reason, we decided to closely examine the fertility behaviour of Vietnamese couples and to look in particular at the impact of the absence of a son on family formation. The rich sample from the 2009 census (3.7 million households) provides an adequate dataset for exploring several dimensions of family systems. We observed that families that failed to have a son after two live births were indeed more likely to have a third child than families that already had a son. This variation is a clear testimony to the desire for a male offspring felt by many Vietnamese couples. Looking at estimates of son preference (see table below), we can confirm that the absence of a son has a sizeable impact on reproductive behaviour: it increases on average the probability of having another child by almost 60% in Vietnam. Yet, this son preference appears significantly larger in the Red River Delta, where sonless women are 2.6 times more likely to go for another pregnancy than other women.

How is the preference for son linked to family patterns and the strength of ‘patrilineal’ values? If we follow David Haines’s hypothesis,2 which stressed the unique position of kinship in Vietnam as a nexus of influences, we should expect to see traces of both East and Southeast Asian patterns. Using the same 2009 census dataset, we examined the post-marriage arrangements of children in order to differentiate between strictly patrilineal systems – when married sons and their wives often co-reside with their parents for a few years or more after marriage – and more bilateral or unilineal systems – in which married daughters and their husbands may also stay with their parents. The proportion of sons among co-residing married children served as a simple indicator of the strength of patrilineal and patrilocal practices (see table below). This analysis leads us to realize the vast gap between the strictly patrilineal North and the rest of Vietnam. Some provinces in Central Vietnam are even characterized by an equal share of sons and daughters residing with their parents after marriage. This is a typical ‘Southeast Asian’ feature, but it remains mostly undocumented by most anthropological research on contemporary Vietnam.

Notes