



Gendered Disease Exposure and Cultural Persistence: How Schistosomiasis Shaped Gender Norms in Southern China

by Prof. Bingdao ZHENG

Associate Professor

School of International Relations and Public Affairs

Fudan University



HKT

Monday, April 14 2025

04:00 p.m.- 05:30 p.m.



Scan to
register

Webinar via

zoom

This study investigates the long-term cultural consequences of gender-differentiated exposure to historical health shocks in southern China. Using county-level data on schistosomiasis prevalence, we exploit the exogenous geographic variation in infection risks — driven by the ecological distribution of oncomelania snails and male-biased occupational exposure to water contact — to identify how male-disproportionate disease burdens reshaped gender norms.

We demonstrate that regions with higher historical schistosomiasis prevalence in southern China exhibit persistently lower sex ratios at birth in 2000 and more egalitarian gender attitudes in 2010, including stronger support for equal inheritance rights, greater acceptance of matrilineal surnames, increased female autonomy in personal decisions, and enhanced women's intrahousehold bargaining power. By leveraging historical snail habitat data as an instrumental variable, we isolate the cultural impact of the disease from potentially confounding policy interventions. Preliminary mechanism analysis suggests these effects stem primarily from increases in female labor force participation rather than through educational empowerment channels.

Our findings indicate that male-selective health risks gradually eroded the economic rationale for son preference and reinforced gender-equitable norms. This study contributes to the literature on historical persistence by highlighting how biological factors (specifically sex-differential disease susceptibility) interact with economic constraints to catalyze cultural change in agrarian societies.



ZHENG Bingdao is an Associate Professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University. She received her Ph.D. in Social Science from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Her research explores public policy and governance in China, with a focus on the institutional impacts of population policies, welfare systems, hukou regulations, and educational arrangements. Her work has been published in respected journals including *Demography*, *Social Science Research*, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, and *Chinese Sociological Review* among others. Her research has received support from the National Social Science Fund of China and the Ministry of Education Research Grant. Prof. Zheng's ongoing projects utilize large-scale historical datasets to analyze the relationships between historical disease distribution patterns, cultural norms, and the evolution of land institutions.