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Citation

Knowledge@SMU. Male metal goat wanted: why our children's futures may lie in the stars. (2009).

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Male metal goat wanted: why our children's futures may lie in the stars

Published: August 03, 2009 in Knowledge@SMU

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It appears to matter less whether you are a girl or a boy, an Earth Horse or Water Pig, but more importantly, that you are a wanted child – at least in Vietnam.

Quy-Toan Do is an economist for the poverty team at the World Bank's Development Research Group. He has been observing the development of children born across the spectrum of auspicious and inauspicious years in an attempt to determine the sources of child health and schooling heterogeneity.

In his paper, "The Importance of Being Wanted", co-authored with Tung Duc Phung of Vietnam's General Statistical Office, Do notes that children born in years deemed auspicious attended, on average, two more years of school. There was also a reported 12% increase in fertility rates during auspicious years.

The authors posit that most of the children born in auspicious years have been planned, whereas those born in inauspicious years were more likely to be unplanned. "Everything in Vietnam is done according to the Vietnamese horoscope," asserted Do. "Parents and grandparents will go to fortune tellers to get advice on details on the best date to conceive and the most favourable years to bear a child."

This horoscope, of course, is based on Chinese astrology, which looks at the interactions of the five elements (the 'yin and yang' of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) with that of the 12 zodiac animals.

Table: Vietnamese horoscope 1977 to 1998

Year of Birth	Year of the:	Boy	Girl
1977	Dinh Ty (Fire Snake)	Neutral	Bad omen
1978	Mau Ngo (Earth Horse)	Good omen	Good omen
1979	Ky Mui (Earth Goat)	Good omen	Good omen
1980	Canh Than (Metal Monkey)	Bad omen	Bad omen
1981	Tan Dau (Metal Rooster)	Neutral	Good omen
1982	Nham Tuat (Water Dog)	Good omen	Bad omen
1983	Quy Hoi (Water Pig)	Good omen	Neutral
1984	Giap Ty (Wood Rat)	Good omen	Bad omen
1985	At Suu (Wood Ox)	Bad omen	Bad omen
1986	Binh Dan (Fire Tiger)	Neutral	Bad omen
1987	Dinh Mao (Fire Rabbit)	Good omen	Bad omen
1988	Mau Thin (Earth Dragon)	Neutral	Neutral
1989	Ky Ty (Earth Snake)	Bad omen	Neutral
1990	Canh Ngo (Metal Horse)	Neutral	Good omen
1991	Tan Mui (Metal Goat)	Good omen	Good omen
1992	Nham Than (Water Monkey)	Good omen	Bad omen
1993	Quy Dau (Water Rooster)	Good omen	Bad omen
1994	Giap Tuat (Wood Dog)	Good omen	Neutral
1995	At Hoi (Wood Pig)	Neutral	Good omen
1996	Binh Ty (Fire Rat)	Neutral	Neutral
1997	Dinh Suu (Fire Ox)	Good omen	Bad omen
1998	Mau Dan (Earth Tiger)	Neutral	Bad omen

In the study, Do argued that unplanned children cause "income shocks" to families, which may explain lowered investments for an unplanned child's education. If this is true, would it be accurate to conclude that unwanted children are predisposed to a bleaker future?

Children as planned investments

Do, who spoke in a recent seminar at Singapore Management University (SMU), revealed that the motivation behind the study was to examine the growing heterogeneity in children across cohorts. He was asked about the average cost of consulting a fortune teller, as cost considerations may limit access to information, thus affecting family planning.

While the rates for fortune telling were not considered in his study, Do noted that its effect would be negligible, as low income, ethnic minority families have been known to find ways and means of consulting fortune tellers. This is because auspicious childbirths are regarded with great importance in Vietnam - perhaps even more so amongst less well heeled families.

Superstitions aside, it has been argued that family planning is just as important for wealthy families. Also, while both high and low income groups may partake in fortune telling, the low income groups might still be less capable of providing for their children, regardless of whether or not the child was born in an auspicious time. So how can we know if an auspicious child will indeed fare better?

In the study, Do looked at families with two children: one born in an auspicious year (assumed to be planned), and the other born in an inauspicious year (assumed to be unplanned). This was to negate differential variables, such as family income. In comparing the data between siblings, Do found that those born in auspicious years enjoyed more years of schooling.

As the Vietnamese horoscope differs between boys and girls, the authors also observed that schooling differences might not have been due to the "accuracy" of the horoscope, but rather, to birth planning. What this means is that children born in auspicious years benefit from a more favorable environment and enjoy more years of education - perhaps simply because they were wanted.

The advantages of being wanted

Do and Tung offer two explanations for the favorable growth afforded to children born in auspicious years. First, it may be said that the size of the cohort induces greater investments, nationally. The authors do not speculate the mechanics of this "cohort size spillover effect" and they do not have to. One potential scenario could be that bigger classroom sizes mean lower school fees per child, for instance. But be that as it may, this spillover effect may not be statistically significant. An argument is that if one is born in a "bad year", the cohort size is smaller and each child is exposed to less competition.

Second, there is a belief that those born in auspicious years are actually more capable than those born in inauspicious years - a "child endowment effect". As parents believe that their auspicious child is already deemed lucky, they are motivated to invest more, so that their children may reap the benefits that come with this birth luck.

To make sense of this, the authors examined the data of "unlucky" children - girls born in years auspicious for boys only (and vice versa) and children born in generally inauspicious years. Since these groups are considered to be "unlucky", they would be equally "endowed". What the authors found was that children born in years that were auspicious for one gender did better than those born in years that were generally inauspicious for both genders (Note that since the gender of the child is indeterminate at the time of conception, the single-sex auspicious years would also be considered planned conceptions even if, ultimately, the child's gender renders that timing inauspicious).

Cohort size and child endowment aside, Do noted that economic factors can also explain the investment or lack of investment in a child's education, such as the ability and preparedness of families to meet the additional costs of having an unplanned child. "Groups that are able to borrow [credit] to smooth the 'income shock' should be able to improve the outcome of the child," Do explained, adding that a child's "endowment" should include "effective investments, such as physical resources and better cognitive development".

To raise overall educational levels, the authors suggested that aid agencies could provide credit options for families faced with the added expense of unplanned children - so as to increase the accessibility of education. At the end of the day, however, a child's actual and effective development depends on more than just her parents' economic means.

Plan for a better future

So what can policy makers learn and apply from this study of links between Vietnamese family planning and astrological motivations? Quite a fair bit, so it seems. For one, the data can serve to predict outcomes in education and employment for the "wanted" and "unwanted" cohorts of citizens. Policy makers may also rely on such data to


guide discussions on touchy issues such as abortion.


Through the study, the authors observed a positive correlation between abortion and crime rates, education levels, and so on. "It is often assumed that children that are not desired by their parents do worse many years later. With this study, we now have some idea of the mechanics which relate planning and long term health outcomes," Do explained.

In the Singapore context, implications from the study are seemingly minor, as the dependent variable - number of years spent in school - is mitigated by the government's basic education subsidy. However, support afforded to parents with unplanned children, in terms of healthcare and social assistance, may address the "income shocks" that come with the unexpected, additional expenses of having an unplanned child.

Other countries where such a study may be applied could include China, India, Korea and Japan - where traditional horoscopes have remained culturally relevant. As younger generations become less superstitious, however, the influence of astrology on child births may prove to be more difficult to examine. Until that time comes, couples, families and policy makers would do well to think about the prospects in family planning - because it is not enough to simply reproduce; it is also important, for the children's sake, to plan ahead.

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