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## ARTICLE

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Maximizing status or fertility?

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## Research

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## Ecological variation in wealth–fertility relationships in Mongolia: the ‘central theoretical problem of sociobiology’ not a problem after all?

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The negative wealth–fertility relationship brought about by market integration remains a puzzle to classic evolutionary models. Evolutionary ecologists have argued that this phenomenon results from both stronger trade-offs between reproductive and socioeconomic success in the highest social classes and the comparison of groups rather than individuals. Indeed, studies in contemporary low fertility settings have typically used aggregated samples that may mask positive wealth–fertility relationships. Furthermore, while much evidence attests to trade-offs between reproductive and socioeconomic success, few studies have explicitly tested the idea that such constraints are intensified by market integration. Using data from Mongolia, a post-socialist nation that underwent mass privatization, we examine wealth–fertility relationships over time and across a rural–urban gradient. Among post-reproductive women, reproductive fitness is the lowest in urban areas, but increases with wealth in all regions. After liberalization, a demographic–economic paradox emerges in urban areas: while educational attainment negatively impacts female fertility in all regions, education uniquely provides socioeconomic benefits in urban contexts. As market integration progresses, socio-economic returns to education increase and women who limit their reproduction to pursue education get wealthier. The results support the view that selection favoured mechanisms that respond to opportunities for status enhancement rather than fertility maximization.

### 1. Introduction

