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Abstract

Since the early 1980s, China has experienced an alarming and increasing gender skew in infants, with up to one million more boys than girls reported born annually in recent years. Using the most recent Chinese demographic data, this paper argues that the social causes of this gendered demographic phenomenon can be attributed to two major government-led transitions begun in the 1970s: the privatization of the rural economy and strict family planning regulations. The paper also considers the state-driven discourse of 'population quality' (suzhi) as a factor influencing popular attitudes toward reproduction. In a male-centred society, the market logic implicit in this discourse—which encourages citizens to improve the nation’s future through bearing fewer, 'higher quality' children—helps to justify the decision to bear a son rather than a daughter. This paper uses the situation of certain marginalized female children to illuminate the pervasive yet often-overlooked gender, class and cultural divides that are currently broadening within contemporary Chinese society.

Walking through an old apartment complex in Beijing’s university district, I spotted an enclosed glass case containing a poster of a smiling Chinese girl in pigtails holding a large rubber ball. Printed above her head in large Chinese characters was a series of slogans:

Care for girls.
All of society needs to pay great attention to girls’ healthy development.
Today’s daughters are the constructors of tomorrow’s society.
Caring for girls protects everyone’s future interests.
Bearing a boy, bearing a girl, just let it happen naturally.
Girls and boys both enjoy the same rights.

Below the child’s picture were three smaller photos. The first showed a weight scale with a group of baby boys seated on one side and baby

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girls on the other, with the weight of more boys tipping the scale precipitously downwards. The second picture showed a laughing father tossing his happy daughter in the air. The third shot was the most striking—depicting a wedding scene between a Chinese bride and groom in full western attire, exchanging vows before an audience made up entirely of anonymous, identical young Chinese men.

On first sight the imagery and wording of this poster is alarming, even shocking. But as one travels around the city, surrounding countryside, and further out into distant provinces, the same campaign to ‘care for girls’ (guan’ai nuhai xingdong) appears time and again in Chinese public spaces. Instituted in 2003, this governmental campaign has been attempting to combat pervasive and increasing social discrimination against daughters, which has become most apparent through the astronomical increase in births of male infants and corresponding drop in female infants in China since the early 1980s.

Since this abnormal sex ratio at birth first became evident, demographers and economists have conducted many statistical analyses measuring its scale (Hull 1990; Coale 1991; Johansson and Nygren 1991; Zeng et al. 1993; Coale and Banister 1994; Sen 1998; Banister 2004; Poston 2005; Zeng 2006; Zheng 2006). While large-scale surveys have been immensely useful to gain a larger understanding of this issue, until now there has been a noticeable lack of theorizing about how this trend in population reflects Chinese modernization processes as well as growing social and gender inequalities since the beginning of the reform era.

This paper seeks to describe the scope of this predicament and answer the following questions: why has the abnormal sex ratio at birth in China been increasing in recent decades? How does this discrimination against daughters link to Chinese economic reforms and governmental control over population in the reform era? And lastly, what does this trend reveal about the gendered implications of Chinese modernization?

I argue that Chinese rural economic reforms and implicitly gendered governmental birth control policies—interrelated processes which both began in the late 1970s—have created an unprecedented stratification of children based on sex. As economic competition has caused Chinese parents to rely on their own family units for social support, bearing a healthy son has become the major way to ensure future security in a time of growing uncertainty. Correspondingly, millions of female children who are deemed as having low economic value are often not being born at all.