

Gender Selection in China: Its Meanings and Implications

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With the advancement of assisted reproduction technologies, people are offered wider choices to choose the gender of their offspring and to construct 'ideal-typed' families with specific gender structure. Gender selection is welcomed by many societies with gender-specific preference, especially those patriarchal societies such as Chinese communities. It is not only a medical procedure but also a social orientation, which reveals much of the underlying preference towards gender. This paper explores the cultural dimensions to gender selection and its psychosocial meanings and implications in Chinese societies, especially after the establishment of One Child Policy in China. Problems associated with son preference in the culture with strong gender stereotyping are addressed. We believe that gender selection for social reasons should not be allowed since undesirable outcomes will be resulted under such strict population control program.

KEY WORDS: Gender selection; infertility; Chinese culture; male preference; gender ratio; population control.

INTRODUCTION

Male preference is known far back in history. In ancient Chinese, Egyptian, and Greek civilizations, there were practices and manipulations which were claimed to be effective in influencing the gender of a child before its birth. Countless myths, folk remedies, and magical potions were tried. Even in the contemporary era, couples are still relying on all

sorts of advice to change time and frequency of intercourse, delay or promote orgasm, douche or even alter diets to facilitate conception of a male infant. Because of the strong cultural male preference in the East, practices to influence gender selection are common in Japan, China, Thailand, Malaysia, India, etc.

There are natural conception centers, advisory services, and medical clinics round the world to help couples in gender selection. This is particularly obvious in Asia. However, there are relatively little discussion and debates on ethical and moral issues related to gender selection. This paper will explore the cultural dimensions to gender selection and its implication in Chinese societies.

The population and health statistics of China and the information on gender imbalance by World Health Organization is used. Statistical test using normal approximation is done for testing the significance of the gender ratio. A component method is used in estimating the number of male and female of the age group 20–49 up to 2029; for details, see Pollard *et al.* (1).

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CHINESE CULTURE

Male Preferences

In China, there is a traditional folk belief that it is a blessing to have a lot of children. Couples usually have six, seven, or even eight children. For the rich men who can afford a few wives, they may have 10–20 children. After the introduction of birth control measures in the 1970s, family size became smaller. However, it is still common to find families which continue to reproduce after having five, six, and seven girls until they have a son especially in the rural areas. Couples feel obliged to bear a male heir for the family. That was the time before gender selection technology and procedures are available. There was a common name among girls in the 1950s and 1960s called “die di” meaning “bring a younger brother” in Hong Kong and China. The way to ensure having a son is to produce more children or marry another wife. Infertile couples will have to rely on adoption of their nephew by the kind permission of a kinsman. They must adopt because they will need a son to carry out the funeral rituals when they die. Being infertile or not having a son is a curse in life.

The traditional culture of aspiring to sons stays with the population. The more traditionally inclined persons tend to accept having a son as their filial obligations. It is the duty of the Chinese wife to bear a son to continue the family name. The population in the rural areas and people who are lowly educated tend to want sons much more than daughters. They prefer sons to daughters because sons can help in farming and heavy duties. Since about 70% of the population still lives in the rural areas in China, the male preference is still the dominant mode (2).

Family Orientation

Sons are essential to the traditional Chinese societies. Liu and Rose (3) showed that the majority of Asian women attending a gender clinic had two or more daughters and requested sons. Chinese regard continuation of the family tree as a filial obligation. In the traditional family genogram in the ancestral halls, only the names of sons and grandsons are put onto the list. Daughters are not even counted into the family list, as they will change their surname once they get married; while sons could keep their surname unchanged and so keep the continuity of the family line.

Old Age Security and Support

Changing surnames of the daughters after marriage means many things in Chinese societies. Once the

daughters get married, it is believed that they belong to her husband and his family, and thus they would also move out from her family-of-origin. Her family-of-origin, especially her parents, relies heavily on their sons and daughters-in-law for the security of old age. Therefore, families place much preference on male offspring. For those who “fail” to conceive sons, they would experience much frustration. They may keep on trying to conceive a son after several procreations of daughters, and they may use different kinds of treatment or technologies to fulfill their needs.

Male Patriarchy

The men usually make all the major decisions in the family. Women have to be submissive and comply with traditional and cultural norms and expectations (4). In old China, “women who cannot bear a son” is a good ground for divorce. A man living in a village community in Hong Kong told us, “The most embarrassing moments were during Chinese New Year and worships in the ancestral hall when a male child is born by one of the other kinsmen in the village. We would usually turn off our light and assume that we are not at home.” There is a strong sense of shame and blame for not being able to bear a male descendent to the extended family.

Fertility and Male Potency

Chinese equate fertility, sexual ability, and potency to male strength and energy in life. Ability to bear children is seen as of utmost importance. There is a strong sense of shame and guilt associated with infertility. The men usually find it difficult to accept the status of being infertile. The cultural expectations on male potency and fertility can be a source of social pressure on Chinese people. A man joining the assisted reproduction clinic of the Queen Mary Hospital in Hong Kong broke down in tears during a counseling session. He said that it was very stressful to keep the secret of his infertility from his parents and family members. Being the only son in the family, he felt a strong sense of shame not being able to continue the family name.

Rigorous Gender Stereotyping

In China or some Chinese societies, men are usually still the main parties offering financial support to the family, while women are helping in household chores. This leads to gender discrimination in labor market:

Women are more likely to be in lower paid and more casual jobs, less likely to be promoted, and more prone to be laid off. Accordingly, the social safety net for women, such as medical insurance and fringe benefit, is relatively weak.

POPULATION CONTROL IN CHINA

In China, the issue of gender preference was complicated by the introduction of the One Child Policy to control the population. This policy has been in place for over 20 years. According to this policy, couples in urban areas are usually allowed to have one child. In rural areas, couples whose first child is a girl may have a second child, but only after a specific time period that varies from one location to another. Couples from ethnic minority groups in border areas may have two or three children. The aim is to control the population growth. China's current population of over 1.2 billion is expected to peak at 1.6 billion by 2050 with an expected annual increase of approximately 13 millions for the next several years. China's birth rate is currently 15.23 per 1000 with a natural increase of 8.77 per 1000 (2). The Government's publicized goal is to keep the population below 1.4 billion by 2010. With the reinforcement of the One Child Policy it leads to two very serious consequences: ageing and gender imbalance which may have serious implications in future.

To deter the population from giving birth to too many children, very tight control of only one child per couple is being administered through a "child-bearing permit" which all married couples have to apply for before they can deliver a child with an official "household registration." This household registration will provide the child access to education, health care, employment, and social services. Couples who violate the One Child Policy will be severely sanctioned. When the couples can have only one child, most of them will naturally desire for a son, thus creating a huge market for technologies and techniques for gender selection. However, the Chinese laws prohibit the use of technologies for gender selection for social reasons.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH PREFERENCE FOR A SON

Despite the prohibition of gender selection for social reasons, a number of statistics indicate that the couples may be using other means to have a son.

Gender Ratio at Birth

Almost 20 years after the government began to try limiting the population by the One Child Policy, there has been a rapid decline in the crude birth rate in China, (33.43 in 1970, 21.04 in 1985 to 15.23 in 1999) (2). In the 1960s and 1970s, the gender ratio at birth was very close to 106 (5). Since the mid-1980s, it has been rapidly increasing, with 114.2 in 1992 and even 116.3 in 1994 (6,7). It is believed that it continuously increased in recent years up to 118 in 1999.

The reason for the change in gender ratio is not known, but the possibility of prenatal diagnosis of the gender of the fetus followed by abortion of a female fetus cannot be excluded. The easy access to abortion services and the development of technology for prenatal diagnosis may aggravate this problem.

High Female Infant Mortality Rate in Rural Areas

The mortality for the female of age of 0–4 is higher than that of male, 0.0318 and 0.0253 respectively. Figure 1 shows that the ratio of the number of deaths of males to those of females of age less than 1 year in urban and town districts is very different from that in the rural districts. For the urban and town districts, the ratio was 1.6 to 1, while for the county districts it was 0.84 to 1 (2). The proportions of the rural and urban population in the year of 2000 were 30 and 70%, respectively. The cause for such a difference in the ratios of the mortality rates is not known, but it may be caused by a difference in quality of care being offered with the male infants receiving better quality care. These problems may reflect the low status of women and girls in the rural areas in China (8,9).

Abandonment

The number of girls in orphanages in China is much higher than that of boys. There are an estimated one

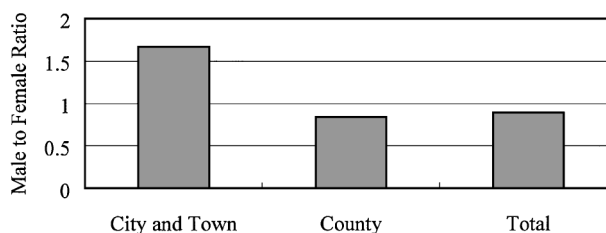


Fig. 1. The infant mortality gender ratio by district in China, 1999.

million orphans in China, nearly all of them being girls (10). More girls are being abandoned soon after birth, and the boys who are being abandoned are mainly babies with visible disabilities or illness. The girls are being abandoned because if the parents do not register the girl, they can still use the childbearing permit to make a second trial for a boy. Abandonment is taken as a form of gender selection by these parents.

High Female Suicide Rate

China is the only country in the world where the male-to-female suicide rate is less than 1 (11). Also the rural suicide rate was four times as much as the urban counterparts. And the rural women suicide rate of the age group 20–35 was one of the highest and exceeds their male counterparts. The main cause of high female suicide rates are linked to the use of fatal method, poverty, and low status of women especially in rural China (12).

Imbalance in Gender Ratio

The imbalance between males and females is a pattern seen in many Asian countries, but not to the same extent as in China. There are an estimated 114–118 males born for every 100 females in China, while the international norm is 106 males to 100 females. Table I gives the gender ratios of the age group 0–4 of selected countries based on a report from the World Health Organization. Many Asian countries have exceeded the world norm, but Mainland China has the highest ratio of 119:100. Such disparities in numbers of male and female children may result in a significant number of men not being able to find wives when they become adults in the future. The problem will become more acute in the rural areas when teenage girls also migrate to work as factory workers and domestic helpers in the urban areas. Figure 2 gives a projected difference of males and females of the age group 20–49 up to 2029 based on the fertility and mortality schedule of 1999 and the birth gender ratio (119:100). The component methods are used to project the population distribution up to 2029. Details of the method can be found in (1) and (13). It is estimated that males may outnumber females by up to 30 millions in 2029. The imbalance in gender ratio will cause other social, economic, and political problem. The long-term implications of the population distribution warrant careful consideration, especially by the health professionals, policymakers, and social planners.

Table I. Population Gender Ratio (Male to Female) of the Age Group 0–4 of Selected Countries^a

Country	Year	Gender ratio
China	1998	1.1901 ^{*b}
South Korea	1995	1.1339*
Hong Kong SAR	1997	1.0847*
Singapore	1997	1.0769*
Spain	1997	1.0679*
New Zealand	1996	1.0667
Malaysia	1996	1.0650*
Philippines	1995	1.0644*
Italy	1996	1.0580
Germany	1996	1.0546
Canada	1996	1.0534
Australia	1995	1.0525
Japan	1996	1.0519
United Kingdom	1996	1.0518
Egypt	1996	1.0506
Indonesia	1995	1.0499
United States	1997	1.0483
India	1997	1.0418
Sri Lanka	1996	1.0374
Thailand	1997	1.0261
Burma	1997	0.9904

^aWorld Health Organization (WHO) or www.stats.gov.cn (National Bureau of Statistics of China).

^bSignificant at 0.001 significance level.

* $p = 0.05$.

These statistics suggest that even when the use of technology for gender selection is prohibited by law, the strong cultural preference for boys may lead to gender imbalance with all its potential problems as the couples are using other ways and means to have a boy. However, there are signs that even the strong cultural concepts of gender preference may change with improvement in the educational levels of the population and other aspects in the society. In a gender preference study among women in Hong Kong, there

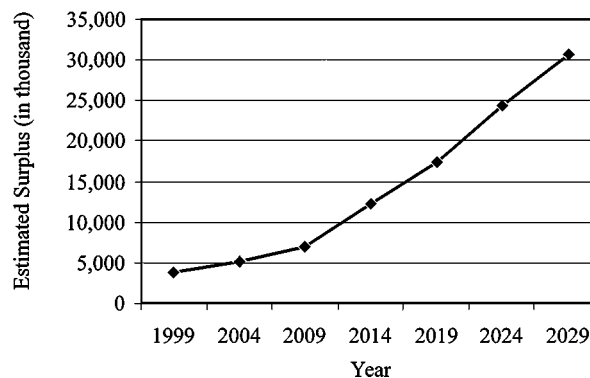


Fig. 2. The estimated surplus of men over women (in thousands) of age 20–49 of China, 1999–2029.

is a tendency to prefer more girls than boys especially among the women who have a higher education attainment level (14). In Hong Kong the total fertility rate fell below 1.0 since 1998 and is still decreasing. Some of the married couples are opting out not to have any children at all (14). The preference for boys is changing in Mainland China as well. According to a report in *China Daily* (5 February 1998), four fifths of people in urban areas have no preference on their child's gender while the other fifth were split on their preference for a boy or a girl. Also, the total fertility rates of the women in Shanghai and Beijing fell below 1 with the rates of 0.86 and 0.83, respectively. The respective birth rates were 5.2 and 6.0 per 1000 persons, which were the lowest among the 31 provinces. Shanghai and Beijing are two of the prosperous regions in China. As a matter of fact, some of the married couples do not have any children (15). The male-to-female gender ratio was about the world norm.

Gender selection offers choices to potential parents on procreation. Parents could then choose to have offspring with desirable gender. The gender-selected offspring will serve as a fulfillment of his or her parents instead of being respected as a life. A selected child who does not fulfill certain types of gender stereotype that the parents believe could suffer. As a consequence, with the aid of gender selection methods, persons of both genders may suffer because societies force people into rigid gender roles, which in turn leads to gender inequality (16).

CONCLUSION

In a culture with strong preference for the male, the use of laws to prohibit the use of gender selection is not adequate to ensure a gender balance. When this is coupled with a strict population control program, it may even lead to other undesirable results.

However, we believe that gender selection for social reasons should not be allowed; as it will give a wrong message that the society is endorsing gender

inequality. On the other hand, the enforcement of the laws must be accompanied by measures to raise the educational level of the population and to improve the status of the women.

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