

The Causes of China's Abnormal Sex Ratio and Improved Approaches

Yanguang Wang *

Abstract

This article tries to show that the causes of China's abnormal sex ratio are the traditional cause of China's shortage of females and the underlying cause of the son preference in Chinese culture and; China's Ultrasound technology abuse also should be blamed; China's economic system reformation and discrimination against women are reasons on the shortage of daughters; China's one or two-child policy is not the main cause of abnormal sex ratio, but was related to the couples' sons fever and shortage of girls. The laws and regulations of prohibiting the sex-selection failed to balance the male and female sex ratio. Its failure and female infanticide are the causes abnormal sex ratio. This article also discussed the approaches to prevent further losses of daughters. It is stressed that the major requirements are to ultimately overcome the deep preference for sons and reform the social insurance structures related to women.

In the end, this article shows that bioethics education can cause a rational decision from the parents who are making a choice to use prenatal tests. Compared with Ultrasound diagnosis for a later abnormal abortion and selective female fetus abortion, the preimplantation genetic diagnosis has the advantage of being used before the pregnancy.

* Prof., Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China

The study found preimplantation genetic diagnosis was more readily accepted in some Chinese couples after they accepted the bioethics views that fetus has moral status although they are not a person, and abortion much more harm to fetus and mother. So the better way is using preimplantation genetic diagnosis to prevent both abnormal or female fetus abortion and infanticide within the son preference culture.

Keywords

Sex Ratio, Bioethics, Abortion, China, Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis

Based on a data from national population and reproductive health survey in the end of 2005, the male and female's sex ratio of age from birthing has been 118.88 : 100 and has been close to 120 : 100. The male and female's sex ratio reported had risen to above normal of 107 : 100 by international standard. More seriously, the male and female's sex ratio reported in provinces of Jiangxi, Guangdong, Hainan, Anhui, and Henan has been 130 : 100. In a report in July 2007, the number of man larger than women in China has been 37,000,000, and the number of man larger than women of age from 0-15 has been 18,000,000. The abnormal sex ratio should be changed, an unbalanced sex ratio would eventually produce serious social problems, and endanger the long-term stability of the nation, and constitute a serious breach of social and medical ethics on the part of the women involved.

This article tries to show that the causes of China's abnormal sex ratio are the traditional cause of China's shortage of females and the underlying cause of the son preference in Chinese culture and; China's Ultrasound technology abuse also should be blamed; China's economic system reformation and discrimination against women are reasons on the shortage of daughters; China's one or two-child policy is not the main cause of abnormal sex ratio, but was related to the couples' sons fever and shortage of girls. The laws and regulations of prohibiting the sex-selection failed to balance the male and female sex ratio. Its failure and female infanticide are the causes abnormal sex ratio.

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prenatal tests. Compared with Ultrasound diagnosis for a later abnormal abortion and selective female fetus abortion, the preimplantation genetic diagnosis has the advantage of being used before the pregnancy. The study found preimplantation genetic diagnosis was more readily accepted in some Chinese couples after they accepted the bioethics views that fetus has moral status although they are not a person, and abortion much more harm to fetus and mother. So the better way is using preimplantation genetic diagnosis to prevent both abnormal or female fetus abortion and infanticide within the son preference culture.

I. The Bloodline of Family on Sons

The traditional cause of China's shortage of females and the underlying cause today are the son preference endemic in Chinese culture, especially in rural culture and in some minority cultures. The son preference coupled with devaluing the female child and neglect of girls could be manifested by a differential access to health care, and an unequal share of nutrition within the small family asset, especially in countryside of China. The cause of sex selection is the traditional value placed on male offspring to continue the bloodline.

The traditional weakening of daughters' ties to their natal families after marriage, the dependence on sons for the support of the old, and China's rigid customs of patri-local and patri-lineal marriage restrict the land rights to the males of the patrilineal clan and so on. Those customs make daughters be worth little in the eyes of their natal families.

A foreign professor made a visit to rural northern China to compare the family situation on daughters with sons. The residents of a village often asked to this professor rhetorically, "What good are daughters for? Once they will marry out, they will be no longer at home." Such

phenomenon is echoing people everywhere in China. This professor found out that the key difference between filial sons and filial daughters is that of support. Daughters may give substantial gifts, provide loans, or offer help with work or care for sick parents. But, property is given to sons and not daughters(Ikels 2004, 42).

The selective abortion for sons happens both in the countryside and in the cities, even though someone emphasized that intentionally aborting a female fetus rarely occurs in big cities. He commented that girls are even preferred in cities because urban daughters are likely to take better care of elderly parents than are sons. But other informant pointed out that this was not really the case, arguing that, if other siblings in the extended family all have girls, strong family pressure is usually brought on the youngest couple to bear a son in order to continue the family bloodline. In most time if a husband is the only son of his family, and his wife just gives birth to a girl, then she will be blamed. All members of the husband family will hope that a boy should continue the family bloodline.

From an interview with an urban woman an oversea Chinese scholar learned that the woman referred to the aborted fetus as “my son”, noting that she often thought about the fetus after the abortion. Asked why she used the term “my son” and not “my child” or “my daughter”, she replied that “son” is just a general word for a fetus or a child: “I do not regard men as superior to women, personally, I would prefer to have a girl”, but she acknowledged that despite her own preference, she had actually wanted to have a boy for the sake of her parents-in-law as well as her husband like most urban women(Nie, Jing-Bao 2005, 138).

Six overseas Chinese mentioned sex preference, especially preference for a son, as a condition under which a Chinese woman might have an abortion. In their view, many couples want a son and will abort

a female fetus as soon as they know its sex(Nie, Jing-Bao 2005, 102).

II. Elderly People's Social Security Benefits and Filial Piety of Sons and Daughters

Giving birth to a boy is not merely culturally preferred in China for the sake of continuing the family bloodline. People in rural areas need a son to take care of them in their old age, and rural residents usually have neither medical insurance nor welfare of any kind. Given the absence of any retirement or social security benefits in rural China and family structure in which responsibility for parents usually rests exclusively with sons. Adults in China usually say that they need a son to ensure their welfare when they can no longer work. Son is essential for the well being of the aged especially in the countryside(Nie, Jing-Bao 2005, 158).

Because of the Confucian tradition of filial piety and the ideal of family members living together in intergenerational households, many consider the family to be the culturally appropriate locus of care for the aged. This arrangement is viewed as especially true in rural China and where only small numbers of people receive pensions(Ikels 2004, 34). Filial piety, which had been the highest family value, permeated every corner of daily life and extended to the realm of rituals and ritualistic performance. Filial sons were generally defined as those who served their parents kindly and rightly when their parents were alive and observed the mourning rites when their parents died. Traditionally daughters were not responsible for the support of their birth parents (Ikels 2004, 19).

A foreign researcher examined the nature of support provided to aged parents by sons and by daughters in rural China. This case study was done in Lijia, a village in central Shandong Province where he lived and conducted fieldwork from autumn in 1997 to near the end of 1998.

He found that to the people of Lijia filial piety has been distilled to its barest essence. It is from immediate needs and relationships. When applied to sons, filial piety primarily means support for their parents. Whereas, when it is applied to daughters, filial piety means visiting parents on holidays and bringing gifts. It is also about not creating conflict in the family. The support for parents by their sons is a cultural norm, and it is often accepted as natural law without further justification. Sons are in many cases the only source of support people can expect to have in their old age, and for this reason people prefer to have sons than to have daughters.

The villagers of Lijia feel that daughters are not expected to support parents. But it is morally imperative that sons support parents when they are no longer able to care for themselves. People respond that sons and daughters should support parents differently. But their first reaction is often that it is simply the way things should be. Yet they feel that daughters can be filial, and daughters do, in fact, often provide significant support for parents. Villagers would often point out that support of parents is appropriate reciprocation for the raising their sons. "Since I took care of them when they were children, they take care of me when I am old." They do not apply the same logic to their daughters. Although most villagers said that the filial piety of daughters was the same as those of sons, they did not feel that daughter had an obligation to support them in their old age(Ikels 2004, 36).

Although children including daughters are mandated to support their parents in old age in China, the main incentive for sons to provide support in the village is social and cultural, but not legal. While filial piety is part of this mix, support by sons and brothers are usually detailed in family division contracts, that provided by daughters is not. These contracts serve to ensure not only that support will be given, but also that it will conform to and not exceed the requirements written in

the contracts. Support given by daughters is neither contracted nor expected. Daughters may provide nothing for their parents or may give gifts exceeding the support given by their brothers(Ikels 2004, 35).

III. Economic Reforms and Discrimination against Women

Even though the Chinese government prevents further losses of daughters by the policies and additional approaches, China's developing economic system reforms have caused the discrimination against girls and women. Due to market driven economic reforms and the private company working chance of women is much lower than that of men, and the retiring age of women is much younger than that of men. It is much more difficult for female college students to find a job than male students do when they graduate their school.

Following the economic system reforms, a big immigrate population moved to city from rural area. Immigrate women's status has deteriorated because of discrimination against rural women in employment status and wages. Layoff rate of women is higher than that of men in the state sector jobs. Rural women are more concentrated in full-time agricultural labor whereas rural men have better business opportunities. There was no health care insurance system for the immigrate population. Since China's one or two child family policy lost the control in the immigrate couples, they can get desired children or more sons from illegal medical clinics.

IV. China's One-child Policy and Sex Selected Abortion

Abortions undertaken for a wide range of reasons in China were caused by unwanted pregnancy and personal convenience to preference for a male child, and have something to do with the requirements of the

national population policy.

China's one or two-child policy is not the main cause of abnormal sex ratio, but was related the couples' sons fever and shortage of girls. During the strict China's one-child policy period parents are highly motivated to prevent or limit the birth or survival of daughters in order to achieve the desired one son. In China, during the 1980s, family formation seemed to proceed as follows: Couples allowed the first birth to occur without intervention. In general, if the firstborn was a son, they were happy. If the first born was a daughter, a city couple might be willing to stop at one child, but most rural couples wanted to try for a son who will be a main family labor and for some other reasons mentioned above.

In the late 1980s, to reduce incentives to discriminate against daughters and to consider the situation of rural family, China's family policy shifted from a one child or two children policy in rural areas. If the first child was a son, the couple must stop childbearing with one child, but if the first-born was a daughter, they were allowed to have another birth. Chinese government opposes to sex-selective abortion, and it is illegal for the medical professionals to tell parents the sex of the fetus during pregnancy. In the son preference driven culture, some rural couples, knowing that they would be allowed to have only two children, sought ultrasound to discover the sex of the fetus, and then aborted female fetuses until the wife was pregnant with a male fetus. The small proportion of couples with two or three daughters without any no son might be most determined to abort all female fetuses until a male fetus was detected, and bear a son. A case happened in the rural China mirrored this situation. A peasant woman almost died in an illicit attempt to have a third child she was hoping would be a son.

V. Ultrasound Technology Abused for Sex-selected Abortion

Ultrasound technology abuse should be blamed for discrimination against daughters in China. Before the ultrasound technology or technology of prenatal sex identification became available in China, the sex ratios of children were normal in numerous provinces. After ultrasound became widely available, the shortage of girls emerged, son preference is very strong and sex-selective abortion is used extensively. In addition, there was substantial excess in female mortality rates, and ultrasound technology abuse has worsened the situation by enabling sex-selective abortion.

From an investigation, a male informant reported that every couple in a particular village had a son. The village leader had bought an ultrasound machine, as result, it was much easier for him to carry out the family planning policy. And people weren't complaining. Besides, the local authorities could make some money by using the machine for gender diagnosis(Nie, Jing-Bao 2005, 102).

VI. Infanticide and the Abnormal Sex Ratio

There is some ground for assuming that prenatal discrimination through sex selection will at least to some extent replace postnatal discrimination such as female infanticide and various forms of neglect of girls as expressed in their higher mortality rates. The ancient practice of female infanticide has not been completely abolished in the world. It has been brought earlier with the utilization of new 'medical' technologies for the selective abortion of the female fetus. Ultrasound, amniocentesis, and chorionic villus sampling have been abused for this purpose(Bubuck 2004, 217).

In addition to the use of contraception and abortion, many societies

including China have resorted to infanticide and child abandonment as methods of limiting family size. The killing and abandonment of infants, in particular females, has been practiced from very early times in China. For centuries, infanticide was not deemed as a straightforward illegal act, partly because the social, moral, and legal control exercised by parents over their children extended to the matter of life and death. Although infanticide and abandonment are clearly illegal in contemporary China, they still occur (Nie, Jing-Bao 2005, 150).

VII. The Regulations and Laws Failed to Balance the Male and Female Sex Ratio

Prenatal diagnosis of sex and selective abortion for males has been issued out in a series of regulations. As early as September 1986, the National Commission for Family Planning and the Ministry of Health circulated a regulation promulgated by the authorities in Beijing that prohibited prenatal diagnosis at the request of the mother, except when used by authorized hospitals to diagnose certain hereditary diseases. Individuals or clinics violating this ban were liable for penalties.

In May 1989, September 1990, and April 1993, the 1986 decree was reaffirmed in the circulars issued by the two national authorities. Sex identification of the fetus using medical techniques (except when necessary on medical grounds) and selective abortion for no medical reasons are strictly prohibited in the Law on Maternal and Infant Health Care (1994), the Law on Population and Family Planning (2001), and the comprehensive regulation on this subject issued jointly by the National Committee for Family Planning, the Ministry of Health, and National Administrative and Supervisory Bureau of Drugs in 2002.

The Act passed by the legislature of China in 1994 bans sex determination, and imposes fines and imprisonment on doctors who

reveal the sex of the fetus to parents. But there is consensus that the law has failed to balance the male and female sex ratio. Doctors and parents worked in collusion, and sex determination involved not only oral verdicts by doctors, such as by describing the fetus as “son” or “girl” rather than, for instance, “child”, but also body language by doctors which would be recognized by the parents. Without written evidence of disclosure, law enforcement agencies cannot easily discharge the burden of proving beyond reasonable doubt that doctors provided prohibited information.

The Medical Council has promised to revoke licence of doctors who found to be guilty of wrongful disclosure of fetal sex. Social activists and legal experts, however, are skeptical that any short-term solutions will emerge while the social practices that led to preferences for sons remain. There is a feeling that this is a situation where there is social sanction to an outlawed practice. Until that situation changes, it will be difficult to convict doctors or parents.

The non-medical purpose for sex-selective is illegal on the regulation issued by Ministry of Health in 2003. Even though the abnormal sex ratio reported by Chinese government two years ago, a main government newsletter named “Renming Ribao” on 6 July, 2007 had proved that this new regulation still failed to balance the male and female sex ratio.

VIII. The Improved Approaches of China’s Abnormal Sex Ratio

As an advocate for women’s improved status in society, the Chinese situation has demonstrate that laws or policies to prohibit sex-based abortion do not address the roots of the problem, an fail to remedy the injustice of pervasive discrimination against female children and women. The symbolism of the prohibitory gesture may be satisfying, but

it may appear futile if it does not recognize that remedies to the injustice of women's inequality should be sought in other areas as well. When such remedies are achieved, future parents will not have the need for a son.

The main approaches of preventing further losses of daughters in China should stress ultimately the endeavor to overcome the deep preference for sons and to reform the social insurance structures related to women. The strong preference for sons and various social, economic and cultural factors which reinforce it will not be genuinely free women in making a choice in China, about sex selection. Its very availability will increase the pressure to make use of it. If reform of entrenched customs that prejudice economic and other capacities of women might enhance the status of women, the prejudice against female children would be resolved.

One of the toughest challenges is to modify customs of patrilocal and patrilineal marriage. It is stressed that the major requirement is to ameliorate and ultimately overcome the deep preference for sons. In order for Chinese daughters to survive and be valued as much as sons are, they need rights and responsibilities to have lifelong close ties to their natal families. The Chinese government has promoted some of these changes and has passed egalitarian laws. The need now is to more vigorously enforce the laws giving daughters' equal rights and responsibilities. One change that could have weakened discrimination against daughters would be the creation of a rural system of social security, especially for the old, and the strengthening of existing urban and rural pension systems. Government could raise popular consciousness about the importance and value of daughters to their natal families in China.

In recent years the Chinese Women Association has launched campaigns against female feticide and for caring girls in some rural area.

Women's Studies Institute of China has been interested in such issues as women's development and gender equality in the economic, political and cultural life. WSIC has carried out a number of important research projects. WSIC also sponsored many important national and international symposia concerning women's issues. WSIC has paid great attention to produce the important policy papers to the leaders of government and the central party committee. In this way the women's studies have effectively served for state legislation, government decision-making, and the practice of women's movements toward gender equality.

IX. Bioethical Education and a Rational Choice to Use Prenatal Tests

Even though prenatal tests have been developed to detect abnormalities in the fetus, they have been misused as fetal sex tests in the some of counties in the world. The procedures commonly used are referred to as amniocentesis, chorionic villus sampling, and ultrasound diagnosis, in amniocentesis. The doctor extracts cells from the amniotic fluid surrounding the fetus. It is normally performed during the seventeenth week of pregnancy. For chorionic villus sampling, the doctor uses a catheter inserted vaginally through the cervix to extract a few milligrams of placental tissue. It has the advantage of being used at an earlier date in the pregnancy, but it carries more risk. Ultrasound diagnosis has the advantage of being non-invasive (done from the outside of the body) but it has the disadvantage of being accurate only later in the second trimester of pregnancy.

Genetic testing such as prenatal genetic diagnosis has been applied in China in recent years. One bioethical study showed that bioethics education could cause a rational decision to the parents who are making a choice to use prenatal tests. Compared with Ultrasound diagnosis for a

later abnormal abortion and selective female fetus abortion, the preimplantation genetic diagnosis has the advantage of being used before the pregnancy. The study found preimplantation genetic diagnosis was more readily accepted in some Chinese couples after they accepted the bioethics views that fetus have moral status although they are not a person, abortion have much more harm to fetus and mother. So the better way is using preimplantation genetic diagnosis to prevent both abnormal or female fetus abortion and infanticide within the son preference culture(Lizhi, Liang 2006),

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