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Forty Million Missing Girls: Land, Population Controls and Sex Imbalance in Rural China

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By Laurel Bossen

Abstract

In the study of China's rural development, economists and political scientists have frequently examined land policy, while demographers, sociologists and anthropologists look at family planning. Yet in real life the two domains are closely related as households attempt to match and manage their land and labor resources. This article brings together questions about land, gender and family planning in relation to both policy and practice. It draws on fieldwork in rural north China and comparative data to examine and assess local and regional variations in the critical gender imbalance in contemporary rural China.

"The dearth of girls is now more extreme in the PRC than anywhere else in the world."

One of the toughest challenges is to modify China's rigid custom of patrilocal and patrilineal marriage, the restriction of land rights to the males of the patrilineal clan." Banister (2004)

Missing girls

Recent studies suggest that over 40 million girls and women are 'missing' in China (Klasen and Wink 2003). The problem was driven home in various ways. One article stressed the "frustrations of as many as 40 million single men by 2020."[1] A major book has warned of the impending danger of social and political instability stemming from a surfeit of young men with no prospects of marriage (Hudson and den Boer 2004). Reports from specific places illustrate the concern. The city of Guiyang in southwest China had 129 male babies born for every 100 female babies. Guiyang banned abortions after 14 weeks of pregnancy in January 2005. A large street banner bluntly proclaimed, "Firmly crack down on the criminal activity of drowning and other ways of brutally killing female babies." But a clinic down the street advertised ultrasound tests, allowing people to choose methods other than drowning daughters.[2]

Discrimination against girls has undergone what Amartya Sen termed a radical change as it shifted from female disadvantage in mortality to female disadvantage in natality (2003). Over the past two decades, sex selective abortions in rural China and a number of other Asian countries have rapidly been replacing the brutal methods of gender (sex) selection mentioned above.

Three basic explanations for Chinese gender discrimination occur again and again in scholarly and popular discourse. These are that sons are necessary for heavy farm labor, to support their parents in old age, and to carry on the family line. These explanations offer convenient stereotypes but little deep analysis. A brief look at them will raise some questions.

1) Heavy labor. Rural women have contributed a large proportion of the farm labor in China for nearly fifty years. The fact that many men have left farming to women and migrated to towns and cities in search of better incomes since the 1970s undercuts the "heavy labor" argument.[3]

2) Old age support. The patrilineal family system requires that a son stay home to support parents and that daughters who marry out support their husband's parents. Parents expect to be supported by sons and daughters-in-law. Sons are given the means, in the form of heritable local property rights, to support parents. Yet it is not uncommon in my fieldwork to run across parents who receive as much or more economic and personal-needs support from their married-out daughters, even those living in another village or district, as from their sons or daughters-in-law. Why is it inconceivable or unacceptable for daughters and sons-in-law to support parents in old age? Usually, the answer to this question is to move on to the "family line."

3) The family line. Continuing the family line from father to son is a mandate and perhaps even a mantra, repeated so often in some areas that it is never questioned. Without doubt, the concept of the family line is a powerful force in Chinese society, one closely linked with historical lineage concepts that were suppressed in the Mao years. Why have lineages re-emerged and become so important in some areas in the post-collective era since the 1980s? Why do some regions and groups place much more importance on lineages than others (M. Han 2001, Cohen 1990, 2005)? Why does the search for expanded networks and social relationships often continue to exclude women from its formal mapping?

In addition to the three explanations above, social scientists have probed more deeply. Demographer Judith Banister (2004) examined the reasons for China's growing sex imbalance including poverty, the political or economic system, socio-economic development, educational level, Chinese culture, the one-child policy, low fertility, and ultrasound technology. She found that China's shortage of girls cannot be explained by poverty, political or economic system, by the level of socio-economic development or by educational level as these variables do not correspond to the demographic evidence. However, daughter shortage within China is closely associated with the distribution of Han Chinese culture within China proper, while the peripheries and most minority areas have more balanced sex ratios. Banister argues that the introduction of the state family planning policy, and its more rigorous enforcement in Han areas, is associated with a rising proportion of sons. This trend became even more marked once ultrasound technology for sex testing became available (though illegal for this purpose), followed by abortion for sex choice. The recent demographic data support the view that female disadvantage in mortality has been transformed into female disadvantage in natality. Banister notes that "the combination of continuing son preference, low fertility and technology is causing the shortage of girls in China." (2004:13). Yet she also mentions a number of more specific factors.

"One of the toughest challenges is to modify China's rigid customs of patrilocal and patrilineal marriage, the restriction of land rights to the males of the

patrilineal clan, the traditional weakening of daughters' ties to their natal families after marriage, the dependence on sons but not own-daughters for old age support, and other customs that make daughters worth little in the eyes of their natal families (Das Gupta et al. 2004). So that China's daughters may survive and be valued as much as sons, they need rights and responsibilities to have lifelong close ties to their natal families. The 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." (Banister 2004:14).

Here we find one of the few clear references to the property system as a factor in China's son preference. I will argue that more than labor or the family "line" is at stake. The system of family property and the political institutions for holding and transmitting land and property rights need to be more carefully examined.

Conventional explanations pointing to labor, old age support and family line do reflect the way many people talk about son preference. They point to relatively benign and uncontested cultural assumptions without calling attention to the more controversial and conflictual aspects of the property system that discriminates so persistently and pervasively against girls and women. This article considers the links between property rights and population control to see how these two policies work together to produce the enormous deficit of daughters. Who exercises de facto control over land and property? Despite government efforts to legislate gender equality, patrilineal institutions retain considerable power in many rural areas. Their workings within village power structures need to be made more visible. The close ties to women's natal families that Banister advocates would be stronger if daughters were in line for a share of the family house and land.

Pradeep Panda and Bina Agarwal, writing about India, claim that few people study women's property status in relation to violence. Examining marital violence, they argue that for women economic independence can deter violence. "In all existing research, however, a significant unexplored factor is the impact of women's property status on the likelihood of violence. In fact, we came across no study either for India or elsewhere where this had been studied empirically" (Panda and Agarwal 2005). Panda and Agarwal are concerned with property ownership as a way of protecting women from marital violence, but I will consider the idea that property ownership for women may also increase chances of pre and postnatal survival for girls.

Facing massive sex imbalance, the Chinese government has belatedly moved from silence and cover-up to taking measures to encourage better treatment of girls. Yet while some policies reflect thought about the causes of discrimination, they ignore the core institutions that shape rural society to the detriment of women and girls. Some of the measures that have been reported in the press are:

1. A ban on ultrasound for sex determination,
2. A ban on late abortion,
3. Propaganda that girls are good, and
4. Provision of pensions for parents with one child or two girls.

The first three measures deal with symptoms rather than causes. Forbidding the use of ultrasound for sex determination, and forbidding the use of abortions to try again for the desired sex do not address the reasons why parents are making such a choice. Public denunciation of female infanticide provides a warning but does not address the reasons why people take extreme measures against newborn baby girls. Proclaiming that daughters are as good as sons is simply blowing in the wind. The fourth measure directly responds to the claim that sons are needed for old age support. In some places the government has promised to provide pensions for parents who have no sons, but no national resources have been allocated for such pensions, which can be found only in a few communities. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether promises for pensions at age 60 will significantly affect the reproductive choices of parents aged 20 to 30. [4] In sum, the kinds of vigorous measures required to end the killing of girls are nowhere evident.

1. A government poster encourages the nurturing of girls. It reads:

Girls and boys are equally good.
Care for and love daughters
The whole society should nurture healthy daughters
Today's daughters are the builders of tomorrow
Take care of daughters for they are the people's future

To bear sons or daughters is natural
Daughters and sons have equal rights
Daughters and sons are equally good.

While it is common to point to son preference in Chinese culture, sex ratios evened out during the collective years (Banister 2004, Greenhalgh and Li 1995, Johnson 2004), with the surplus of males only rising sharply during the reform period. For two decades, up to 1980, collective resources supported children so that the economic incentive for couples to keep reproduction in tune with household resources (or else become poorer) was lifted. In China as a whole, the combination of growing population and high state extraction of grain at low prices kept rural standards of living low (Huang 1990; Friedman, Pickowicz and Selden, 2005).

The 1980s reforms gave the rural population more incentive to produce, and greater control over household economic affairs. The distribution of land to farmers encouraged households to control births or face reduction in per capita land holdings. The state did not, however, leave this to chance; from the late 1970s it enforced rigorous birth quotas, initially one child per household.

Rationing land and rationing children was the state's solution to the land problem. Rural families would receive equal amounts of land to use (not to own), and would have equal numbers of children. This would provide a form of social insurance for all at no cost to the state, and prevent the reduction in resources and income per capita caused by population growth. Surprisingly ignored, or dismissed, is the fact that children are not equal, and in Chinese society, men and women are not equal.

In historical understandings of gender, marriage was followed by patrilocal residence and patrilineal heirs. Parents supported sons by giving them houses and land, and sons supported parents in old age (Croll 2000). The link between them was property. Parents did not form a multi-generational contract involving land with daughters. These local understandings were the products of long-standing patrilineal tradition in most of China, supported up to the mid-twentieth century by organized lineages and clans. Maoist revolutionaries, while denouncing feudal thought, never challenged the tradition of daughters marrying out while sons inherited their parents' living space and their father's kinship ties. Sons were crucial to the contract between generations and to defining village membership.

The policy of limiting parents to one or two children directly affected the ability to obtain sons. Its impact was differentially felt, according to what Attwood (1995) has called "demographic roulette" or to what peasants traditionally called "fate" – that element of life that they could not control.

The family arithmetic is not too hard. At the birth of the first child, roughly 50 percent of the families will get a son and be satisfied, having produced an heir and a pillar of support in old age. The remaining 50 percent will eagerly await the birth of the second child. At the birth of the second child, half of these will get a son, bringing the total number with sons to 75 percent. A 75 percent majority will then have met their basic demand for a son, but 25 percent of families will then have two daughters. These are the families that, in a society in which regulations have made adoption extremely difficult (Johnson 2004), will take desperate measures which may include attempts to break the quotas, hide or give away girls, or if necessary abandon, kill, or neglect their infant daughters in the hope that they will then be able to have a son. Consistent with this, demographers find a "two-decade trend of deteriorating infant mortality rates of females relative to males" (Cai and Lavely 2003:17).

To these daughter-only families, ultrasound machines and abortion of female offspring are relatively low-cost alternatives in their quest for a son, and undoubtedly preferable to bearing and hiding, giving away, or abandoning unwanted second or third daughters.

Under the circumstances, local officials who enforce policies are caught between pressures from above to enforce birth quotas and angry villagers demanding the right to have sons. What of the anger and desperation of households that failed to produce a son -- twenty five percent of households in areas where families honor the quota and do not prevent female births or kill newborn girls?

The outcome, now well demonstrated in massive statistical evidence of millions of missing daughters, is a product of the contradictions between national regulations and local culture in a system in which the state provides little social welfare and few safeguards for property rights that might, in the long run, mitigate the problem. By ignoring gender factors in framing the birth control policy, China now faces the problem of millions of missing girls and women, and millions of bachelor men. The rules and structures of village life combined with those of the national government produced the demographic and social consequences that challenge China today.

The Yellow Earth: Huang Tu Village, Henan

I began fieldwork in Huang Tu (a pseudonym) in spring, 1989 with brief visits in the 1990s and again in 2004. I selected this farming village for two reasons. First, as early as 1981 the census data for Henan Province showed a demographic pattern favoring sons, with a birth sex ratio of 110 males per 100 females (State Statistical Bureau 1984:420-427). Sex ratios that rise above the expected norm of 106 male births per 100 female births are a warning sign that female children are endangered. [5] In 1989, Henan's birth sex ratio rose to 116, the third highest in China (Zeng Yi et al (1993:294). Second, the village was located in a wheat-growing region, like most of the north China plain, with cotton as a subsidiary crop. Historically, these crops provided the main food and clothing for the farmers and for the market, until home spinning and weaving was largely replaced by factory-made cloth, reducing women's work and their economic value to the household. When I arrived in 1989, over 80 percent of Huang Tu Village labor force was employed in farming, with construction as the next largest occupation. Women played an active role in the agricultural labor force during the collective era and in the reform period women did even more of the farm work as large numbers of men sought work outside the village. Women were among the family workers sent to dig ditches for a village irrigation canal, and they worked in the fields to plant and harvest crops. Huang Tu Village seemed an appropriate place to examine the relationship between gender and development and a possible setting in which to examine the institutions that devalue women. To what extent did development contribute to or undermine what has been called "fierce" patriarchy (Drèze and Gazdar 1996) in which daughters' lives are systematically devalued?

Henan Province and one county: population and missing girls

By 2000 Henan Province, with a population of more than 91 million, was China's most populous province (Henan 2005). [6] The sex ratio for Henan's total population in 2000 was 106 males per 100 females, having risen from 104 in 1981. [7] That for children aged 1-4 had shot up to 136 males per 100 females, with nearly half a million girls missing for the previous four years, 1996-1999. [8] Henan's child sex ratio is among the highest in China which reported a national ratio of 121 males per 100 females aged 1-4 in 2000 (Banister 2004).

The county in which Huang Tu Village is located had about 529,000 people in 1988, and reached nearly 643,000 in 2000 (China census 2000). Sex ratios began to rise in the mid-1980s (Figure 1), shortly after the one-child policy was established, and rose rapidly at the end of that decade.

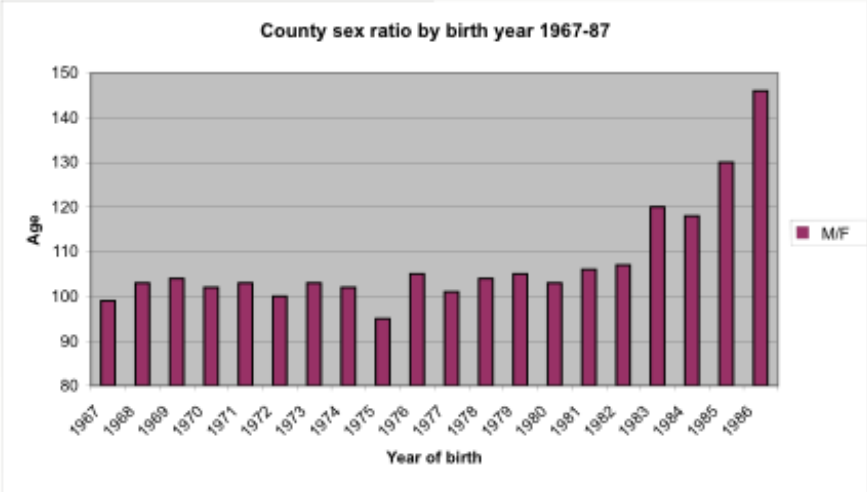

Figure 1.
Source: county police records, 1988

Beginning in 1985, a similar rise in the proportion of boys was recorded at the township (administrative village) level, a unit that encompasses more than ten large villages. Abnormally high sex ratios thus appeared in this rural area fairly soon after the family planning policy was introduced, and before ultrasound machines were commonly available in rural areas and county hospitals (see Figure 2, below). In the early 1990s, I observed that county level family planning offices in the region were still checking contraceptive use by using primitive x-ray machines to detect the presence or absence of an IUD, or a pregnancy.

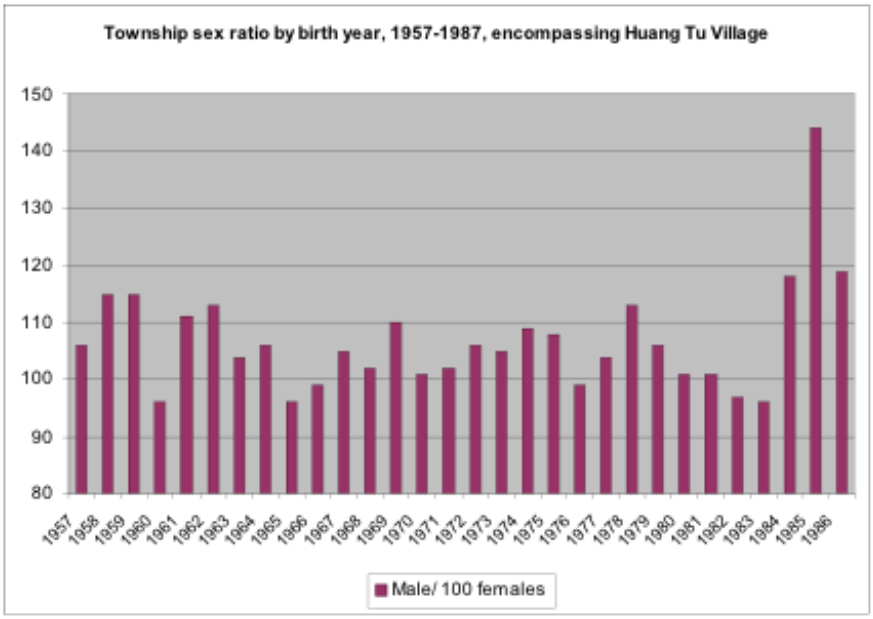

Figure 2

These county and township data show that the broad pattern of missing girls was not acute until the 1980s. In 2000, the pattern of elevated child sex ratios persists. Compared to Henan province child sex ratios (aged 1-4) with a ratio of 136 males per 100 females, the county shows an even higher sex ratio of 146 males per 100 females for children aged 1 to 4. Based on the number of recorded male children, 23,244 females were expected, but only 16,859 were counted. An estimated 6,385 female children were missing. In 1988, Huang Tu Village documents recorded a balanced population with 1206 males and 1210 females. This figure is misleading, however, as men made up only 47 percent of the official village labor force. Village women, at 53 percent, were the dominant source of village labor. The shortage of men was caused by their transfer to nonfarm (urban) household registration status when they obtained government jobs in towns or cities. [9] Thus, village records excluded about 50 adult men whose wives and children retained village registration. This suggests that sex ratios among children were probably higher than normal, with about 50 extra boys. Of registered villagers counted in the labor force, all but 8 (of 495 women and 435 men in the workforce) were in “household-managed” occupations, a reference to farming.

From my first visit to the village, the state birth control policy has been a highly sensitive topic. In 1989, I photographed village officials confiscating household furniture and sealing up the empty house of a family that had fled the village in order to have another child. The offending family’s first child was a girl, and the daughter-in-law was pregnant again before the required four years had elapsed when a second try would be permitted. Higher officials confiscated my pictures.

Two sets of local data, from 1989 and from 2004, supplement official data on sex ratios from higher levels of government. In 1989, I conducted a survey of 50 households selected from each of the eight teams. My sample of 83 children aged 0 to 15 shows a sex ratio of 152 males per 100 females. The data suggest that the sex bias may have been present even before the family planning policy began to be strictly enforced in the early 1980s.

In 2004 I was given access to the household registration records for one of the eight teams. These records suggest that Huang Tu Village sex ratios are roughly comparable to the abnormally high sex ratios reported in census data for the township, county, and province up to the year 2000.

Table 1. Huang Tu Village child sex ratios by age for one team, 2004

Years born	Ages	Number of births	Sex ratio (M/F x 100)

Source: village officials and household registration records, 2004

* Note: the small number of children recorded from 1995 to 1999, and 2000 to 2003 make it difficult to identify significant trends at the local level. From 2000 to 2003,

2000-03	1-4	21	50*
1995-99	5-9	26	189*
1990-94	10-14	40	122
1985-89	15-19	43	115
	Total	**130**	**113**

only 21 children were recorded: 7 boys 14 girls. Only 26 children were recorded for the five preceding years: 17 boys and 9 girls. In such small samples, percentages can fluctuate wildly. In a sample of only 21, the chance of getting 14 or more of one sex (using a probability of .5 for either sex) is close to 20% when the true sex ratio is equal. The same applies to the high sex ratio of 189 for 1995-1999 for only 26 children. The sex ratio of 113 for the total of 130 children is not statistically significant but the direction of the result is consistent with sex selection

Table 1 shows that from 1990 to 1999 quite a few more boys were born. After the 2000 national census revealed the shocking scarcity of girls across China, government promotion of girl children through propaganda may have made local officials and villagers aware of the need to have daughters (or simply to conceal the birth of sons because illegal abortions of females could be inferred from improbably high sex ratios). Given the small numbers of births allowed in any village under the family planning program, it is difficult reliably to identify trends at the local level without referring to larger samples of births or age-sex distributions from more villages or longer time periods. All we can really conclude is that the data for Huang Tu Village are consistent with the larger trends.

The local demand for sons is also reflected in family composition. Using team data from 2004, I calculated the number of households with children who remain sonless and daughterless. Out of 88 households, 66 had children under age 15. In these 66 households, 36 had a child of each sex, leaving 30 couples with children of only one sex. Eighteen couples had no daughter (13 of them had two sons), but only 12 couples had no son. Seven of the sonless 12 had only one daughter and would be able to try again. Only five of the daughterless 18 had just one son and would be allowed to try again. Thus at a minimum 13 families end up with no daughter, and only 5 end up with no son, unless they either have a child outside the quota or adopt one. This gives a rough measure of the number of families that have already broken the rules, as well as those that might want to do so. Nine of the daughterless couples have not borne a child in 10 years, suggesting their reproductive period has ended. Of the five couples who have no sons and already have two daughters, only two have not borne a child in ten years. This suggests that the other three may well try to break the quota.

This exercise in numbers resembles the kind of thinking that family planning cadres across China must conduct if they are to keep village reproduction within the quotas that their superiors require. This team has 17 households with couples who have gone over the quota of two children in the past 17 years. Nine of them had several daughters followed by a son. Only one had two sons first with a daughter as the final child. Of the 12 couples that have not yet had a son, only three are likely to have passed fertility. The others will most likely keep trying despite heavy penalties such as fines and job loss that can accompany out-of-quota births. Assuming half will still have a son, then only eight or nine out of 66 (less than 15 %) couples with children under age 15 will lack a son. Although severe penalties (fines, job loss, confiscation of personal property) may be imposed on those who exceed the quotas, these are often at the discretion of the local leaders who face threats from fellow villagers yet may be punished themselves by higher officials for the inconsistent way they enforce the policy.

The women's director

In 2004, a central building in the village carried a large banner proclaiming, "Girls are as good as boys." The women's director told me, "The population must not increase. We must keep the proportion of births to 1 percent of the population per year. The whole village has about 3,000 people so we can have about 30 children per year."

The director also affirmed that for everyone, the third birth is the last. "If a woman is pregnant with the third, she must get an ultrasound test (B-chao) and see if it's a girl. If it's a girl, she must have an abortion (yin chan). If it's a boy, she can have it and pay a fine." This statement suggests that some family planning officials, under heavy pressure to reduce births, are colluding with the private use of ultrasound tests in order to meet their population quotas and allow villagers to meet their demand for a son. These practices obviously contribute to the sex imbalance.

Conversations on family planning and land

One former village official and his neighbor told me, "All the figures for family planning are jia de (false), or biaomian (superficial)." "None of the statistics are to be believed," they said, "because they don't report girls." They also noted government attempts to crack down on the use of ultrasound to check the sex of the fetus, including fining private clinics and destroying their machines. They were also aware of the national campaign to promote girl children with slogans like, "Girl children are the nation's future." But these measures ignore the root causes of the pressure on rural people to produce a son. "For city people, it does not matter," they said. "But rural people still believe they must have a son to guarantee their basic living or survival in old age"[10]. They went on to explain that rural people no longer give up their land when they move to the city. "Even if the whole family moves to the city, having land and grain is a form of basic welfare. As long as rural people have agricultural registration, they keep their village land and rent it out to others, often relatives."

Land, landholding group, and lineage

"The god of land brings a lawsuit against a farmer who has too many children."
Li Hongkui, fine-arts teacher, Beiguodong Village, Wuzhi county, Henan
(People's Daily Jan. 1, 2000)

Each of the eight teams in Huang Tu is associated with a section of a large rectangle formed by the grid of streets that compose the village. Each team has its own household registration records, conducts its own land allocation, and is responsible for its own family planning. The village as a whole has a village council, a set of leaders responsible for managing local government, with ultimate local authority vested in the Party Secretary.

Land was contracted to individual households in 1980. In 1985 land was re-divided and administered by the eight teams, each of which could reallocate land among the constituent households. Team subgroups (xiaozu) subdivide land according to population changes with readjustments every five years. These are the groups with 20 or 30 households each that readjust the amount of land, drawing lots each five years.

In 1988 the village had 4155 mu of land with about 1.7 mu of land per person. [11] In 1980, when the collective land was divided, everyone – male or female, young or old – had exactly the same amount distributed to her or his family. By 1985, due to family variation in births, deaths, marriages and migrations, differences in land per capita had emerged. Some teams lost members due to official outmigration for urban jobs, such as a man who obtained a government research position in Zhengzhou, and another who studied physics at a university in the United States and later moved to Holland. Others transferred out of the village when they passed the examination to become a state sector teacher, and work in the administrative village school. These individuals may keep their houses or house plots in Huang Tu Village, but no longer receive farm land. The village redistributed land within each team in 1985. Thus, some teams had larger or lesser amounts per capita according to whether they had gained or lost population. In 1989, Team 1 had 2.0 mu per capita, and Team 5 had only 1.3. The village had conducted a second land redistribution in 1990 and at that time the variation ranged from 1.8 mu to 1.3 mu per person, with the average amount of land per capita being 1.55 mu.

In 2004, population growth had reduced the amount of land per capita to 1.25 mu. The team with the least land per capita had dropped to .9 mu per person, while the team with the most had 1.5 mu per capita. The population was then 3207 and farmland had declined to 3953 mu because some land was converted to residential house plots. At the same time, increasing numbers of villagers, certainly a majority of young adults, turned to seasonal and long term nonagricultural work for a large part of their income.

Land policy and population policy in practice

I recently interviewed a farmer who makes a good living from farming about his land. He explained that his household has land for seven people because he has five children. He had three daughters by his first wife who got sick and died (bing si le). The three daughters are 24 or younger, that is, all were born under the birth control policy. All three of these daughters work outside the province in a mobile phone factory. The oldest is to marry a soldier from China's far west, but soldiers are not allowed to marry until age 25. If Huang Tu Village redistributes land next year, the father will get land for his unmarried daughters for five more years despite the fact that none is in the village or even in the province. He has two sons by his second wife, ages ten and seven.

There are several interesting aspects to this example. The first is that land in this village is still held and redistributed per capita so that daughters and daughters-in-law who marry in can be identified with a share. (In Huang Tu Village, these readjustments still take place every five years, but in some parts of China where the contracts are treated as fixed for longer periods, the incoming daughters-in-law may never get a share).

Second, the death of a wife who had three daughters (all born after the family planning policy was in effect, so that the third was beyond the official quota) allowed this man to remarry. Perhaps an exception was also made to allow his first wife to bear three children, but he should not have been allowed to have more than one child by his second wife, particularly when the first was a boy. Having broken most of the rules, he has ended up with two sons as well as three daughters, all of whom add to his land holdings.

Third, if his first wife were still alive, he would have no sons. Without drawing any conclusions about this case, I note that there are many reports of men and their parents in rural China who have beaten and threatened wives and daughters-in-law who failed to produce a son. Prior to the PRC, men could take a second wife or concubine to try for a son, or adopt a boy (Cohen 2005). In the family planning era, few boy babies are available for adoption (Johnson 2004). Polygyny is illegal. Men might consider divorce in order to try again for a son with a different wife. However, divorce is extremely rare in this village, and previously married men or women are not considered desirable spouses. Because ex-wives cannot go home to claim parental property, their rights are generally derived from the inheritance rights of their son. Without a son, the husband's kin may not respect a divorced or widowed woman's marital property rights. For these reasons, I suspect that the mortality rate for sonless and childless rural women is higher than that of rural women who have sons, particularly in single-lineage communities.

Gender and land for houses

One couple that I interviewed is a case of endogamous marriage in Huang Tu Village. Married at the start of the reforms, their parents opposed the match on the principal of village exogamy. They did not want their children to marry within the village, even though they came from different lineages. Both the husband and the wife have become state sector teachers with household registration in the township, so their household registration has been removed from the village. Neither receives farmland. Nonetheless, they built a new house in the village two years ago. They explained, "All sons born in the village have a right to a house lot (zhaijidi) of 3 fen (0.3 mu, or 200 square meters)." When I asked about daughters, they said that an unmarried daughter in theory also has that right, but only sons, married or not, whether they work outside the village or not, actually receive it. For example, a married son of the village who has urban registration and has lived in the city for more than fifteen years told me he no longer has a house, but he still has three fen of land in Huang Tu Village that he allows his nephew to use. According to local rules, however, a married daughter loses the right to inherit the house plot.

Another example of gender and land transfer comes from an extended family with two married sons, each with a child. Several years ago, a daughter married out to a neighboring village. Because the land has not yet been redistributed, the daughter has no farmland in her husband's village while her two sisters-in-law, who have both born children in Huang Tu Village, have received her share of the farmland, until they are given their own full portion at the next land adjustment. These examples illustrate how rural communities continue to exclude daughters from direct inheritance of farmland or house lots, require them to marry in order to obtain land rights through their husband, and then frequently delay making a land share available to them for a number of years until a redistribution occurs (Bossen 2002, Jacka 1997). No wonder that many village women express the view that bearing a son is their duty or obligation (ren wu). Bearing a son not only assures the continuity of the family, but also creates the next male property owner. By becoming the mother of an heir and patrilineage member, a woman secures her claim to land in her husband's village (Gao 1999:238). This is vitally necessary for her because, as a married woman, she loses these rights in her natal village.

Names and uxorilocal marriage

Sensitivity to family planning is evident in numerous domains, some almost humorous. For example, one family that had a son at the very beginning of the Family Planning campaign in 1981 named him "Courteous". They had another son in 1982, and named him "Surpass (as in surpass the quota)" and seven years later in 1989, they had a daughter and named her "Addition".

In another family that had three daughters and no sons, the third daughter was named "Little Brother." She remained with her parents, and married at home in one of the rare cases of uxorilocal marriage. Her husband, a villager, was the son of a teacher from outside the village. Her three children, two boys and a girl born in the eighties, all have the uxorilocal husband's surname. It remains to be seen whether the two boys will be able to inherit land rights from their mother's side of the family. Because it is so rare in this region, I was unable to find any examples of sons of uxorilocal marriage in Huang Tu village, but the literature on uxorilocal and adopted sons contains many examples of inferior rights and status (Gao 1999, Han 2001, Potter and Potter 1990).

Land control policy in practice: the lineage as land enforcement agency

Over the years, I have spoken with villagers and officials about anomalous household situations such as uxorilocal marriage and widow remarriage to better understand how well families or individuals outside the patriline were tolerated with respect to membership and land rights. In one team, I found that uxorilocal marriages accounted for only two percent of all marriages. When I interviewed a leader about uxorilocal marriage in his team, he seemed embarrassed, speaking of the two cases in hushed tones. I comment on the embarrassment because it contrasts so sharply with the many cases of uxorilocal marriage I encountered in a Han village in Yunnan province where uxorilocal marriage was an accepted alternative even in families with both sons and daughters (Bossen 2002). The negative view found in Huang Tu Village is much more common throughout rural China. In Huang Tu Village, one case of uxorilocal marriage occurred in a household that had three daughters and no son, and another in a household where a virilocally married widow with young children remarried. Years earlier, I was told about another case of a widow with young children who attempted to bring in a husband from outside the village. In the first attempt, the husband mysteriously died (drinking himself to death in the company of another Huang Tu Villager), and in the second attempt the man was beaten up and driven out by the nephews of her deceased husband (Bossen n.d.).

Some have predicted that the one-child policy would eventually lead to the acceptance of uxorilocal marriage in rural communities (H. Han 2003). This is because roughly half of all families would have a single daughter and, without a son, this large group of parents would view their daughter as their heir and source of old age support. However, the two-child policy and the use of sex-selective abortion seems to have delayed any such transition by providing the large majority (as many as 85 percent including those who break the quota or practice sex selection) of families with at least one son. In addition to the very low tolerance for uxorilocal marriage exhibited by patrilineal groups in Huang Tu Village, divorce is exceedingly rare and brings considerable stigma.

I did not encounter a single case of a divorced wife or daughter who retained any land or house rights within the village. I met only one woman who had been divorced, although I knew of several men whose wives had run away, giving up their rights to house and land. The one divorced woman, who had remarried into Huang Tu Village, complained that her second husband did not treat her first son equally with the son that she had with him. The stepson was not allowed to inherit. [12]

In Chinese villages, some of these variations in local practice, such as the acceptance or rejection of uxorilocal marriage or of divorced women as entitled to a share of the marital property, hinge on the strength of patrilineal organization. Where villages are dominated by a single lineage in numerical terms, whether or not it is perceived as a corporate group (by constructing lineage temples, for example), it still has considerable informal power to police boundaries and exclude outsiders. One of the major principles of the lineage as an institution is its exclusion of men who are not members by birthright. [13]

The village itself as corporate property

I suggest that debate about whether or not Chinese patrilineal groups require "corporate property" in order to qualify as lineages, may not recognize that the village itself is, in some way, patrilineal corporate property as long as the village leadership can make decisions about who can or cannot become a member. This sense of "ownership" rests not on title deeds, but on lineage strength and the ability to use political connections or force if need be to defend corporate interests. The strong lineage, with meticulous record keeping of members and their links to others, is able to include or exclude. While membership in a village or in the communist party is officially lineage-neutral, the bonds that bring people into relations of trust with one another are still greatly strengthened by lineage affiliation, reinforced by a history of family and residential ties and obligations as brothers, and neighbor-cousins (often called "brothers") often growing up in the same or adjacent courtyards, and as migrant workers calling upon kin to help them get jobs in outside settings.

Lineage theorists tend to think of property as belonging to the individual, household, or lineage, and to look for signs of joint ownership of land, temples, schools, or other buildings (M. Han 2001). But the village itself is a unit whose property is managed by a leadership operating largely under patrilineal rules. Thus, following decollectivization, the village with its bounded membership and territory, maintains a property system with different layers of ownership. Even though individuals contract property for household production, the land remains effectively the property of the corporate group headed by village leaders (Guo 1999:74-75). These leaders also represent lineage interests, as they have throughout the collective period, even though official policy prohibited lineage groups from holding property and conducting rituals. Over the years, as the status inversions of the Maoist years that elevated men of poor class origins are forgotten or overturned, the influential leadership positions of party secretary and the village head often return to members of the dominant lineage (M. Han 2001:146).

In regions where there is no dominant lineage and many different surname groups compete for power, the enforcement of gender rules strictly delimiting lineage membership may be less stringent (Li Shuzhuo et al 2000, and Bossen 2002).

How is power actually exercised within the village? What is the relationship between the exercise of party power and lineage membership? Gao (1999:201) wrote about clan power in terms of family planning, and made some interesting comments on the relationship between clans and the party.

"We must be cautious not to overstate the similarities between the periods before 1949 and that in post-Mao China. For one thing, the clans and the Communist local officials have not yet totally merged as one political body.... in present-day China clan power and the local official authorities still comprise two distinct political entities. Nonetheless there is a great deal of overlap. Furthermore, if the state chooses to, it can still exert power over the local authorities. A clear example of this is the implementation of family planning policies. Since the early 1990s, a large number of abortions and IUD operations have been forcefully carried out in Qinglin and Gao Village, and local clan power has been unable, and in fact has never tried, to stop these brutal measures" (1999:201).

The current birth control burden most directly falls on women who are outsiders to the lineage, as well as on sonless families. Gao's argument suggests that when the state sees its vital interests at stake, it is capable of projecting power to the village level. As long as missing daughters are not perceived as a threat to its stability, however, the state is prepared to accept the power of lineages and other local elites to limit the rights and status of those who do not have sons.

Conclusion

Some scholars have explicitly linked China's family planning policy to missing girls (Greenhalgh and Li 1995) but few have linked the changing character of land ownership under the household responsibility system to increasing sex ratios or linked the dilemma of missing girls to inequitable property rights. Households are now in charge of their own labor power and their own security in the absence of any national or provincial welfare system extending to the countryside and with earlier village mechanisms largely dismantled. For many, security comes from land, and land rights are enforced by lineage-dominated groups. Households in many rural communities are responding to this situation by choosing sons over daughters. This paper has shown the close relationship between the land system and son preference.

What are the consequences for girls when they are scarce? Simple supply-and-demand predicts that the value of women should increase. While scarcity might be expected to promote hypergamy, and appears to do so, countervailing forces remain. The scarcity of women in rural China may also increase the general risk to women of abduction for prostitution or forced marriage to poor men, both of which have been discussed in the press for the past decade (e.g. Han 1991, Hudson and den Boer 2003). To quote Banister (2004:5), "this extreme dearth of women never raised the overall status of females in Chinese society. Today, the dearth of potential brides leads to abductions, rape, forced marriages, and bondage of hundreds of thousands of women; the status of kidnapped women is lowered by the shortage of females, not raised." At the same time, many poor men, and men who lack networking resources, will become permanent bachelors marginalized from society.

In societies with strong son preference, girls who survive sex selection at birth, still confront early childhood discrimination and higher child mortality rates (Bannister 2004, Croll 2001, Lavely and Cai 2005, B. Miller 1997) suggesting their parents see them as lesser investments than sons as they grow up. This inferior status limits girls' opportunities to gain confidence and reach their potential.

The relatively uncertain benefit to their natal family, the pressures to marry young, the increased risk of abduction, and the higher infant and child mortality rates of girls suggest that scarcity without secure rights to property may not do a great deal to reduce sex preference. Although daughters work and earn money, in many parts of China they are not permitted to fulfil the property-holding role of a son whose rights are recognized by the lineage. Excluded by patrilineage rules from claiming a share of land or house, girls form a minority whose lives and futures are less valued than their brothers' and who are offered second best when parental choices are made.

How high will the sex ratio go? Amartya Sen (2003) seemed relieved that nationally it has not risen above 120. If we assume that all rural couples have two children and that the 25 percent who are then "boyless" carry on to have one boy, with the third (and subsequent) girls being aborted or unregistered, then the resulting ratio is 125. If we limit the number of pregnancies to five, then the sex ratio is 122 males per 100 females. (According to Li et al, 2003, describing conditions of high fertility, if families with no sons continue to have up to 5 children, only 3 percent will still lack a son). I suggest that a sex ratio of around 125 is a rough upper limit allowing all families to have at least one son. The danger that it could go higher would seem to depend on a condition where girls per se represent a grave disadvantage to their parents.This can happen when they are expected to provide an expensive dowry – as has been the case in India. In China, the compromises at the local level amounting to a son guarantee mean that the majority of families have at least one son. Some will have two sons, unless the policy is enforced as it is in Anhui province where even rural couples are supposed to stop at one son.

Son preference in rural China is exacerbated by population control. The pattern of skewed sex ratios in Huang Tu Village approximates the more general model of gender probabilities outlined for the two-child policy above, with a rough estimate of twenty-five percent of couples bending or breaking the rules. Insistence on having a son is importantly motivated by land allocation practices and patrilineal rules of male land inheritance. The significance of the patriline is not only that the "line" is a ritual link between ancestors and descendents. Two other factors are crucial. One is that local power, territory, and territorial integrity, are concerns that fall within the traditional domain of lineage interests. [14] Lineage ties that prescribe loyalty and solidarity among men remain a potential source of village political power and brute force. The other is that land and housing are central to the bond between parents and sons who are thereby obligated to support parents in old age.

In rural China, patrilineal groups retain power for several reasons.

• The central government is weak on the ground. It cannot enforce its regulations without cooperation from local leaders who are surrounded by patrilineal kin

groups with claims upon them. This, of course, is a specific instance of the classic observation that "Heaven is high and the Emperor far away."

• Private property in land is not allowed, so local allocation is the practice by which villagers' property rights are defined, with patrilineal principles operating to determine who belongs to the community and can contract farmland. While the introduction of private property in land will not solve this problem as long as the lineage system remains intact in rural areas, the current system unquestionably devalues daughters. It is telling that the state appears NOT to have intervened significantly to guarantee property rights for girls despite the fact that discrimination against girls is one reason for continued pressure to produce sons, which in turn drives up the birth rate.

• Although the state systematically works to eliminate other centers of power, rural lineages are "below the radar" and "traditional," often operating as an agent of the state. They thereby pose a relatively low level threat to state power. Lineage organization thus enters the vacuum which exists where the institutions of civil society otherwise would be. [15]

While there are of course cultural elements in this formulation, son preference is strongly enhanced in response to specific policies and circumstances.

The land reform of the 1950s granted women equal rights to land, and they were counted in the distribution of land to households in the first phase of land reform, which redistributed ownership rights to the household. Collectivization, however, erased those rights for men and women as all became landless workers on collective farms managed by village committees under the direction of the state. Decollectivization did not bring a return to either the pre-revolutionary situation of unequal landownership rights, nor did it bring a return to the land reform situation in which women were supposed to have gained equal land ownership rights. Rather, as explained above, decollectivization brought a mixed system of contracting to households based on patrilineal birthright, with the village government as the effective owner-allocator of the village land.

In the household, there are decisions as to which individuals are members with inheritance rights, and which members are temporary workers bereft of such rights. In the village as well, there are members who have birth rights, and others who have only temporary rights to residence and income, without a say in governance and without a share of inheritance. Because current village practice still treats daughters' land rights in the family and village as temporary, the accepted way for daughters to regain a claim on land and housing is to raise a son for their husband's family and patrilineage. In most cases, this takes place outside the woman's natal village, in the village of the husband. The reform period has witnessed the revival of patrilineal control over village land rights and the implementation of a national birth control policy. Together these developments have contributed to the extreme shortage of daughters in rural China.

Missing daughters are a social problem with profound implications for the entire society. The Chinese government and development professionals increasingly see them as a problem with respect to a broad range of social and economic development issues. The argument that a generation of bachelor males risks becoming not only socially marginalized but also a challenge to political stability is one element. [16] Missing daughters' devalued sisters may also have less to contribute to society than had they been raised in a more female friendly environment. Neither the United Nations Human Development Index nor the related Gender Development Index contains a sex ratio measure. This is an oversight that urgently needs rectification, applying as it does to China, India and other societies with poor agrarian populations. The current measures of life expectancy, literacy, and income, which comprise the index, are, of course, important, but the significance of skewed sex ratios to human development needs to be recognized, formally addressed, and resolved.

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Notes

[1] Justin McCurry and Rebecca Allison. 'One child' policy leaves China with huge shortage of women. The Guardian, London, Tuesday, March 23, 2004, p.9. Among demographers working on this issue, estimates of missing women and girls vary considerably above and below 40 million, depending on the methods used and the age groups examined. See Cai and Lavely 2003, Klasen and Wink 2003, Poston and Glover 2005, Poston and Morrison 2005).
[2] Howard French. Chinese Crack Down on Illegal Abortions. The New York Times. February 18, 2005.
[3] There are many examples in which statements about heavy labor or hard labor by men are presented at face value without documenting the specific work of men or women. See, for example, Li Shuzhuo, Marcus W. Feldman, Nan Li (2003).
[4] An experiment in providing such pension rewards is being conducted in Jiaozuo, northern Henan (Sina.English.com 2004).
[5] See Croll (2000), Drèze and Sen (2002: 257-262), Miller (1981), Sen (2000:104-107), and Banister (2004) for explanations of this standard and for an introduction to the general problem of missing girls. Throughout this paper I use "sex ratio" to measure males per 100 females as this is the standard usually used for China. Studies for India often use the inverse ratio of 94.3 females per 100 males to represent the normal birth sex ratio. In the latter case, birth sex ratios below 94 females per 100 males suggest discrimination against daughters.
[6] Sichuan was China's most populous province until 1997 when Chongqing was made a separate territory of about 30 million people.
[7] This is an abnormally high sex ratio for total population. Normally, sex ratios for total population are much lower due to the greater longevity of women.
[8] Taking the normal sex ratio at birth of 106 males per 100 females, the inverse is .943 females per male. The population of boys age 1-4 in Henan in 2000 was 2,360,487. Multiplying this number by .943 gives 2,225,939, the expected number of girls. The reported number of girls was only 1,731,048. The difference is 494,891, or nearly half a million.
[9] Men also obtained nonfarm status for jobs as "workers" in mines or railroads, while the remaining family members were classified as "villagers" (nongmin, often translated as "peasant"). Access to formal government employment was very rare for village women. Many nonfarm men were counted at their place of work, raising the sex ratio of cities and nonagricultural work sites such as mines.
[10] Banister (2004) reports that cities also have missing girls, but this may be partly due to the inclusion of rural communities and rural towns with urban boundaries, and migration of rural families to cities.
[11] A mu is 0.0667 hectares.
[12] Her first husband was a teacher with urban household registration. In cases of marriage between an urban man and rural woman, the household registration of the children legally followed that of the mother. This policy slowed the growth of urban population and discouraged urban-rural marriages.
[13] For general discussion of Chinese patriliny and patrimony, see Harrell (2002), Bossen (2005). Regarding lineages that lack corporate property in the northern part of China, see Cohen (1990, 1992), and M. Han's study of a lineage (2001) in Shandong. For south China, see J. and R. Watson (2004, 2004a, 2004b).
[14] See J. Watson (2004b) for a description of the role of lineage militia in defending lineage interests.
[15] See Hu Mingwen (2004) and Zeng Guohua (2004) for opposing views on the revival of lineage strength in Jiangxi Province, as well as Ruf (1999, 2000) for Sichuan.
[16] J. Watson (2004b, orig. 1989) noted the link between involuntary bachelorhood and violence in South China. Hudson and den Boer's broad examination of the historical role of unmarried males in China concludes, "Throughout Chinese history, men at the margins of society have been available for work that involves violence. Occasionally they changed the destiny of a nation." (2004b:226)

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