

## **Gender Ratio Imbalance in China**

By Joshua Zhong

As of 2004, there are 16 million more males than females under 30 years old in China, according to the China State Population and Family Planning Commission (CSPFPC). Previously, the 2000 Chinese census showed a disproportionate male-female ratio of 119:100, with some areas as high as 135:100, high above the international average of 105:100. The number of male bachelors could reach 40 million by 2020, when the total Chinese population is expected to climb to 1.557 billion. Experts both in and outside China warn of the epidemic social and political consequences that could likely result from such an unprecedented gender imbalance (South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, August 8, 2004).

### ***What has caused this dangerous gender imbalance?***

China experienced some major political, economic, and social upheaval between the late 50's and 70's, including the failed Great Leap Forward (1957-60), Mao Zedong's utopian idea to bring Communism to China overnight; the horrendous Great Famine (1960-63) that resulted in the death of millions of hungry people; and the notorious Cultural Revolution (1967-77) that not only killed many innocent people, but also shattered some of the most precious aspects of Chinese culture. At the same time, the economic and political turmoil never slowed down the rapid growth of the Chinese population. Mao Zedong's advocacy for a high birthrate and larger population added almost 300 million more people between 1949 and 1976, the year Mao died. By 1978, when the new leadership came to power, the Chinese economy had come to near collapse. Blaming the population explosion as the key obstacle to economic recovery, the government decided to adopt an extreme family planning policy called the One-Child Policy (OCP), backed by serious punishment for offenders.

According to the CSPFPC's report, since the enforcement of the OCP less than thirty years ago, 300 million would-be births have been "successfully" prevented. Unfortunately, the report neglected to mention the hundreds of thousands of births of female and handicapped infants who escaped "prevention" only to suffer abandonment or even death. It is safe to say that the OCP has successfully contained the critical population explosion in China and contributed to the Chinese economic recovery, but it has also brought out some of the worst and most extreme facets of a thousand-year-old tradition of female discrimination – female abandonment and infanticide.

Valuing males over females is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture, as well as in many other cultures. In a country where agriculture plays a supremely important role in society, such fundamental responsibilities like labor for farming, inheriting the family's land, continuation of the family name, and care-taking of the elderly are regarded as the essential duties of a man. The fact that a girl cannot inherit her family's name, will be married off into her husband's family, and is "unfit" for tedious farm labor, renders her worth less than a man's in traditional Chinese society. Until the mid-twentieth century, girls were deemed unworthy of receiving formal education, venturing into society, becoming involved in politics, or conducting business.

While many reasons exist for female discrimination in China, carrying on the family's last name may be the primary one. Unlike the USA, where families' last names are diverse and countless, there are only about one hundred commonly-used family names in a country of 1.3 billion. "Having a boy is

the most fundamental traditional value for a Chinese family,” Li Yong Ping, a researcher at the Beijing University Population Study Center, commented. “Different from westerners, continuing the family name is a strong cultural desire for Chinese. That is why we Chinese put the family name first, while westerners keep the family name last. If a family does not have a boy to inherit their family’s name, it is equal to discontinuing the family existence.”

Nonetheless, before the 1970’s, gender discrimination, no matter how powerful it had been throughout Chinese history, had never led to large-scale female abandonment. Traditional Chinese families have always loved to have multiple children, as having both boys and girls is considered “good fortune.” It was not until the One-Child Policy came into effect in 1978 that Chinese families, especially families living in the countryside, were forced to make the impossible decision, i.e., to abandon the first or second baby girl to try for a boy.

It is true that the OCP never intended to encourage female abandonment. In fact, the Chinese government makes infant abandonment a punishable crime. From the very beginning it has feared the possible rise of female abandonment and therefore promoted nationwide propaganda: “One couple, one child; boys and girls are the same.” Unfortunately, the dreaded problem of female abandonment and infanticide emerged and quickly became a national crisis and source of shame. The propaganda without concrete action or prosecution for the crime has resulted in the abandonment and death of countless female infants, as well as orphanage overcrowding.

The crisis has never been openly discussed and the OCP seriously challenged in China until recent years. Many Chinese sociologists and demographers warn of the grave consequences of a “bachelor nation,” i.e., social upheaval, a rise in prostitution, and trafficking in women. Some experts in China openly point out what has been concluded in the west as well as among many Chinese in private – that the OCP violates basic human rights.

### ***What are the proposed solutions?***

For the first time, the Chinese government is taking some real action to address the imbalanced gender ratio issue. Starting this year, the government is changing from a policy of punishment for those who break the OCP to a policy of rewarding those who voluntarily follow the OPC. Older couples in the countryside who have obeyed the OCP will be receiving retirement subsidies monthly for the rest of their lives. Couples who keep and limit themselves to two girls will receive preferential treatment in healthcare, employment, children’s education, and housing. In some cities and provinces, the government has started to allow young couples who both are “only children” to have two children.

Are these policies enough to reverse the growing trend of gender imbalance and stop female abandonment? I personally believe that although this is a good beginning and will result in some positive outcome, it is doubtful that such an effort will make a lasting difference. The problem of gender inequity is too deeply rooted in the monstrous conflict between two elements: the five-thousand-year-old Chinese tradition of supremely valuing the family name and the unwillingness of the Chinese government to drastically reform or abandon the OCP. There are no easy solutions, but the news is encouraging. While change takes time, the Chinese government is aware of the issues resulting from the OCP. It is gradually beginning to come to grips with the seriousness of the challenges and has made some noteworthy progress.