

The Demographic Masculinization of China: Hoping for a Son

by Attané Isabelle

New York: Springer Press 2013

ISBN: 978-3-319-00235-4

Hardcover, \$129.00, 180 pp.

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Offspring sex preference and its social and demographic significances have drawn attentions from not only demographers but also scholars in various disciplines. The preference for children of a certain sex varies among cultures. People in Asian and Middle Eastern countries tend to have a son preference, while cultures with a Spanish heritage exhibit a slight preference for daughters. Other ethnicities show a preference for gender balance with varying degrees of son preference. Son preference, which is considered a pattern consistent with the cross-cultural predominance of patriarchy, is extremely strong in Eastern Asian countries and regions including Japan, Korea, and China. It is often said that son preference in these countries and regions can be traced back to Confucian beliefs. In a patriarchal society, it is the son who is entitled to retain the family name. So, the essence of son preference rests on the continuation of life from parents to children, through which short life merges into long life, and human life is mingled with nature. This Confucian teaching has become religious comfort to these people. This book, written by Isabelle Attané, attempts to analyse the demographic consequences, or as the author defines, the demographic masculinization in China brought by such a reproductive norm, focusing on two features: the sex imbalance in childhood and youth, and the excess mortality of women at varied stages of their life. The author attributes the preference for sons as the social and demographic discrimination against girls and women.

This book consists of two parts. The six chapters of the first part of the book look at the demographic visibility of the situation. In Chapter 1, the author examines the sex ratio and life expectancy in China as compared with other countries. According to the 2010 census, China holds a ratio of 104.7 men to 100 women, which is among the highest in comparison with a world average of 98.5 in the same year. Meanwhile, there exists gender inequality in life expectancy even China has made a great progress in it since the 1950s. Women are at a disadvantage in term of mean length of life. According to UN data of 2010, female life expectancy in China exceeded that of male by only 3.4 years, a much smaller gap than in other countries with similar life expectancy. The author believes that it be mainly attributed to persistent inequality especially in early childhood. In Chapter 2, the author explores factors behind masculinisation of births in China. While the total fertility rate has declined continuously, the sex ratio becomes higher. The one child-policy itself might play a role in raising the ratio for this policy encourages couples to control the gender of their offspring. Persistent excess female infant mortality would be another factor that contributes to the high sex ratio according to the author. Chapter 3 discusses disparities between urban and rural areas in the treatment of girls. The situation of sex ratio used to be worse in rural areas. In the 2010 census, although the sex ratio at birth was still lower in urban areas when the indicator was broken down by birth order, urban/rural differences were much less distinct. The emphasis of Chapter 4 is placed on female child mortality (aged 0–5). Since the 1950s, this rate has declined but it remained higher than that of male children until the period of the 2000 census. In the 2010 census, the female rate dropped

below the male level for the first time in the history of new China. Excess female child mortality is considered a main factor in causing the female deficit by the author. The imbalance of sex ratio or female deficit for the whole population is accentuated by excess female mortality at older ages, which is discussed in Chapter 5. China is not the only country with a large female deficit. A male surplus also exists in several neighbouring countries. A comparison between China and other Asian countries including India, South Korea, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan appears in Chapter 6. All these countries had a history of high sex ratio, however, some of them including South Korea, Bangladesh, and Pakistan saw a gradual rebalancing of the sexes recently. China and India therefore became the two in the world with the highest proportions of males.

The second part of the book, consisting of six chapters also, is devoted to social values and political conditions that discriminate women. In Chapter 7, the author describes the status of women in traditional Chinese society, interpreting some key features of traditional Chinese culture, including Confucian doctrines, the philosophy of Yin and Yang, and the clan ideology that placed women at disadvantage. Chapters 8 and 9 provide a review of women history in the second half of the 20th century. The author states that despite the communist party's efforts, the laws and policies introduced since the 1950s to protect their rights and interests made little success in improving women's status. Economic development and modernization in the last two decades did not change much about people's preference for sons. Chapter 10 reports discriminatory practices in generating imbalance between sexes. Among these practices, sex-selective abortion and sex-selective infanticide and abandonment play a dominant role. In Chapter 11, the author gives an analysis of socioeconomic factors such as education, standard of living, density of the health, and medical infrastructure that are likely influence female infant mortality and people's discrimination against women. In Chapter 12, the author concludes that demographic masculinization is a new economic and social challenge, not only in China, but also in the world.

This book is perhaps a good collection of findings obtained from other researches, and it does not give us new analyses and deep thoughts as expected. Mentioned previously, the essence of son preference rests on the continuation of life from parents to children. This value with religious comfort or spiritual sustenance is the key to understand the son preference in China and comprehend the reproductive behavior of the Chinese over the world as well. Yet, the author simply attributes the demographic imbalance between sexes to the culture of discrimination against women, making gender inequality as the main theme for this book. Since the author does not catch the pith and marrow of the preference, she could not explain many things including why history and economic development did little about the strong preference in China. The author discusses historical changes in women's status and factors behind discrimination against women, but she ignores historical variations with people's attitude to the preference and determinants in affecting such preference.

A number of important and essential issues related to the domain are overlooked. For instance, pioneer studies pointed out that the preference favoring sons had pronatalist effects on fertility behavior and that it prevented a more rapid fertility decline in Eastern Asia. Meanwhile, fertility below the replacement level has been found common today not only in East Asian countries and regions that are under strong influence of Confucian doctrines, including Japan, South Korea, but also in the Chinese world involving China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Some argued that the preference for sons could be a main factor in causing such phenomenon. The crux of the preference lies in the continuity of the family in a patriarchal line. There is no necessity today in the societies mentioned above to bear a large number of children to guarantee that at least one son will survive to adulthood. The correlation between a large family size and the son preference as it existed before is no longer present today in urbanized (or modernized) Confucian countries and regions. According to statistics, if a couple bears children until they have at least one son, then they will have an average of 1.94 births. However, if a couple stops having children only after having a daughter and a son, then they will have an average of three births. This to some degree explains why the Chinese world holds lower fertility than other ethnic groups. I do not find any discussion of the issue in this book. Furthermore, I have some concerns with the organization of the book for overlapping discussions and analyses appear throughout chapters.