

MA IN SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

China's Gender Imbalance:

From Missing Girls to Leftover Women

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12/19/2013

Since the emergence of civilization, patriarchal rule has been in effect all over the world, and China has long been considered a typical patriarchal society (Yifei, 2011). Pre-Revolutionary China was a society rooted in Confucian tradition. Men were considered superior to women, and women's rights were allotted accordingly (Shu and Yifei, 2012). Girls could be legitimately sold for a bevy of reasons including poverty, debts, to become a concubine, or into slave labour as early as childhood (Pearson, 1995). In addition, many daughters were already betrothed at birth to another family who could reap the benefits from their reproductive capabilities and labour (Pearson, 1995). Women were commodities to be bought and owned, thus shaping social expectation and defining gender roles for Chinese women. A woman's place was in the domestic domain; child rearing and maintaining a suitable household for her family were her roles.

Despite this role as the primary caregiver for the family, at all stages of her life a woman was expected to rely on and be obedient to her male counterparts. Mencius, a Chinese philosopher, outlined women's expected subordination as having three levels: as children girls must obey their fathers, as adults, women must obey their husbands and elderly women must obey their sons (Chan, 1969). Along with this came generations of oppression for millions of women, their voices muted, their intelligence unexplored, and skills undeveloped in order to allow their fathers, their brothers, their husbands and their sons their "biological" right to succeed. In today's China, this patriarchal system has lost the stronghold it once had on society; however I would argue that it is still far more influential than the "post-patriarchal" era that has been coined in recent research and literature (Yifei, 2011).

Patriarchy began to weaken in the 1950s for two primary reasons: the rapid industrialization of China and the Communist revolution (Shu & Zhu, 2012). With China developing at a rapid pace, women were offered more opportunities in the workforce, taking them away from the sole role of domestication, and offering them the chance to develop new skills and use their intellect in new ways. During the revolution one of the main platforms was that women should be liberated from male supremacy; they were encouraged by Mao Zedong “to hold up half the sky” (Pearson, 1995). A key feature of this ideology for gender equality was that women’s liberation would come in the form of paid work which was supported by new legal protection acts and public policies that included extremely accommodating maternity leave and childcare facilities (Shu & Zhu, 2012). However, like many ideologies at the time, these laws and policies were not guaranteed to be enforced and did not take into account the deep-seated patriarchal attitudes of its society. Education and speeches were given to women about empowering themselves and taking part in the new direction China was heading. They were told to break the chains of outdated concepts and traditions, to be revolutionary in the country’s reform (Pearsons, 1995). These speeches, though perhaps inspiring for women at the time, would have been better served if given to the male population with the power to enforce and allow such changes, or if it the movement also included a reduction of women’s role in the home.

Today women make up 46% of China’s labour force (Liu, 2013), and are technically ‘holding up half the sky’, as Mao had hoped. However, what he had not anticipated was the how the opening of a market economy would continue to perpetuate patriarchal values. Like many other places in the postmodern world, Chinese women are expected to hold the dual roles of primary caregiver and wage earners, and men are still the main financial support to families.

While they make up almost half of the job market women are often placed in jobs that are akin to ever-present gender stereotypes, with lower wages and little room for upward mobility (Liu, 2013). Since China has transitioned to a market economy, discrimination against women in the workplace has also increased with almost all employers preferring to hire males as it is presumed that women will take maternity leave and need time off for childcare and household responsibilities (Shu and Shu, 2012). Up until the end of 1970's none of these issues mattered much, yet as profitability has become the number one factor in business, even the most progressive of companies will not hesitate to institute preferential hiring of males stating that they "must keep up with their rivals" (Pearsons, 1995). As a director of a department in an international company in China, I myself have been asked, to my surprise, several times if I am sure I want to hire a woman and was I aware that 'she could get married or become pregnant'. Being well versed in societal norms and biology, I have fought to always hire the best person for the job but I am acutely aware that this is not usually the case. This new found push back against women liberation in favour of profitability leaves women constantly falling back against a glass ceiling that is not very high to begin with.

Post-revolutionary China saw many changes that effected its population beyond the labour force. At the start of economic reforms, China launched its One Child Policy as an emergency measure to slow the staggering population growth that was occurring (Deutsch, 2006). The One Child Policy, which is now thirty-three years old, is still the "largest and most extreme social experiment in population growth control via government intervention in human reproduction in world history." (Wang, Pg.2, 2005). After its rigid initial implementation, the One Child Policy is not as straight forward as its name implies. There are amendments that favour gender

preferences, and have created a severe gender imbalance in the region. According to the policy, urban couples should adhere to the one-child per family rule with few exceptions, however in rural areas couples whose first child is a girl are permitted to have a second child (Chan et al., 2002). Though the policy was put into place because of legitimate concerns surrounding over-population and the overuse of the land's resource, the amendments highlight the importance of producing a male offspring in Chinese society.

Imbedded in the patriarchal culture is not just the preference for a son but the obligation to birth a male heir. According to Confucius, dying without such an heir was one of the three most un-filial acts (Pearson, 1995). It is a wife's duty to bear a son to continue the family name and bring honour to the couple, so much so that in old China not delivering a son was grounds for divorce (Chan et al., 2002) Despite scientific knowledge about genetics, woman continue to be held responsible for not being able to conceive a son. The punishment for this varies from public shaming and isolation, to verbal and physical abuse, to divorce or abandonment in favour of a new partner (Pearson, 1995). Because of centuries of males being assigned the role of the stronger gender, the preference is seen by some as not just ideological but also pragmatic. In Chinese tradition, elderly parents are supposed to be taking care of by their eldest son, therefore not having a boy could equate to a destitute old age (Pearson, 1995). More importantly to the lowly educated and in rural areas, they prefer sons because they can help in farming and hard labour (Chan et al., 2002). I would argue that daughters would be just as capable of performing all of these tasks with as much success as sons, that the belief otherwise is all ideological and built on a construction of what it means to be a man or woman. However,

since the cognitive schema in which I view gender is built from an entirely different rhetoric I will continue to report based on the “reality” as viewed in both old and new China.

What we have seen is that though rapid industrialization, economic reforms and fertility policies have drastically changed the face of China over the last 40 years, gender preferences have survived the transition and are having a large impact on the future of the region. Since the implementation of the One Child Policy has repressed the folk-belief that it is a blessing to have a lot children, and taken away the ability to continue to have children until a son is born, Chinese parents has found creative ways to fulfill their wishes and reinforce patriarchal cultural norms (Chan et al, 2002).

Though most societies have a sex ratios at birth (SRB) of 105 boys born for every 100 girls, in 2012, China’s SRB was 118 boys for every 100 girls (Weigel, 2013). Though the official reasons for this discrepancy are not known, there is a general consensus (which I am inclined to agree with) based on surveys, field work, and literature that the imbalance is due to prenatal discrimination (Ebenstein, 2013). Though sons have been the preference for centuries, prenatal sex selection was limited to traditional methods that were unreliable, with the introduction of ultrasounds and technology sex selection abortions have become more feasible (Ebenstein, 2013). Though government laws ban the use of such technology for prenatal sex identification, in a profit driven society, it is increasingly easy to bribe or use connections in order to achieve such information (Pearsons, 1995). Though in the year 2000 90% of aborted foetuses were reportedly female (Montefiore, 2013), there are no exact statistics for abortions performed,

because although legal, not all are registered with the government or done in government sanctioned hospitals.

Beyond China's hugely imbalanced SRB over the past two decades, male infant mortality rate has declined by 40% whereas the female mortality rate has only declined by 15% (Wang, 2005). These numbers reflect infanticide as well as neglect, allocation of resources and inferior healthcare (Pearson, 1995). There is also the belief that there may be less of a discrepancy in the SRB than the numbers reflect as there have been reports of couples choosing not to register their female births and saving their child bearing permit for their next attempt at conceiving the "prodigal" son. These females, who have been termed "missing girls", have no legal rights in China. They are not provided with education, health care or a social service as they technically do not exist (Ebenstein, 2013). These missing girls are also often abandoned and account for almost all of the one million orphans available for adoption from China, with the small percentage of boy orphans being abandoned are often visible disabled (Chan et al, 2002). Missing Girls is also a term that has been used for all the females who never reach maturity, including aborted foetus, victims of infanticide and early child mortality. The United Nations estimates that there are 200 million girls missing in Asia, with a large number of them from China, and this number appears only to be rising (Davis, 2012).

Before I moved to China and became immersed in the society, I would read about One-Child Policy and its ramifications, believing that the infanticide, the abandonment and sex-selecting abortion were a problem of the uneducated, or a remnant of an 'old' way of thinking. However, through my experiences I have come to realize that though education has helped expand

people's minds to other possibilities, the patriarchal belief in the value of boys over girls exists everywhere. Last year I sat with a close friend as she nervously awaited the news as to whether her sibling was carrying a girl or a boy. I naively shared her nerves, thinking it was just the excitement over finding out information about a new being that was soon coming into the world. However when the news came that her sister was indeed going to have a second girl, my friend's face dropped, she said she had to go be with her sister to support her through what was now going to be a difficult time. Her in-laws, she said, would insist on an abortion. In the end, my friend's family refused to comply and a beautiful baby girl was born, but I never forgot that day and how many little girls were not so lucky.

It would not be giving a full picture if I did not discuss that though patriarchal ideology does reinforce the value of sons over daughters, there are many people (men and women) in today's China, like my friend, that are willing to keep and love their second and even third female children. They are, however, not always giving the choice. The One-Child Policy is enforced by the Family Planning Office and their police. Over the course of the last 30 years they have used many different methods of making sure the rules are abided by. Beginning in the 1980's couples, who violated the policy would be punished financially with 10% of their income seized for 14 years. More recently the punishments have increased to 2 or 3 years of the family's income being seized (Davis, 2012). Despite the economic boom most families cannot afford such a price and are placed between a rock and a hard place (especially if the foetus is not the boy they hoped for) where they have to choose between financial ruin and sex-selective abortion (Davis, 2012). Some women, especially in rural areas, are not even afforded the luxury of a choice, if they are found to be pregnant or in violation of the policy they face forced late-

term abortions, the children being killed immediately after birth and/or sterilization (Montefiore, 2013.) Despite these odds, there are couples who choose to have more than one daughter, if they can afford the penalties then it is a small price to pay. However, if they cannot they are forced to live in hiding or in constant fear (Davis, 2012), a bold choice that may symbolize that perhaps the tides are turning towards increasing the value of a female life.

Feminists would argue that this is a very small percentage of the population and that things are not changing for women in China rapidly enough. Since its inception, Western feminists have rightfully spoken out against the One-Child Policy for its blatant violation of human rights and the consequences it has created for its population (Deustch, 2006). As a mental health worker I cannot argue with both statistics (China is the only country in the world where suicide rates are higher for women than men, (Yip & Liu, 2006)) and lived experience of treating today's female youth. Women and girls in China are viewed differently and in many aspects inferiorly.

However, looking at it from another perspective it could be argued that the enforcement of the One-Child Policy has also allowed for women to advance their position in society.

I would never discount the pain and suffering that the One-Child Policy has inflicted, the policy in itself is oppressive and marginalizing on many levels. It certainly did not have women's empowerment as an objective at its conception. Yet despite all the horrors I would argue that inadvertently the One-Child Policy has contributed to China's investment in women. Firstly, despite Maoist efforts to emancipate women through paid work, many women at the time report that they were too busy birthing and rearing children to take advantage of these new found opportunities (Fong, 2002). With today's lowered fertility rates and the removal of large

families, women have had more freedom to invest in their own education and skill set.

Secondly, without brothers for parents to favour, girls, especially in urban areas, now have more power to challenge gender norms (Fong, 2002). The roles that would have been assigned to male children in the past are now given to female, if only by default. This has had the effect of loosening patriarchal beliefs of what girls are capable of, both on an intellectual and physical level. With this new found perspective, parents are now willing and able to allocate more resources to their daughters. This has led, in my opinion, to the biggest advancement for women, namely investment into their education. Daughters without brothers are now more likely to be encouraged to pursue higher education and more demanding careers, goals that may have been viewed as detrimental to the family unit in the past (Fong, 2002). With the new 4-2-1 family dynamic created by the One-Child Policy (4 grandparents, 2 parents for every child) there is more support than ever for both women who work and for girls pursuing paths different than those that tradition dictates. Finally, parents who have all their hopes, dreams, and love pinned on one child, regardless of gender, do tend to try their hardest for this child to be successful, especially in a society where old-age support is still the norm (Fang, 2002). However, traditional gender stereotypes still exist, and the sudden emergence of a generation of women in whom investment has been made has created a cultural phenomenon unique to China.

When I first heard the term left-over women (Sheng Nu in Chinese), I assumed that it was some sort of attempt at humour. How in a country that faces an extreme gender imbalance could there be unmarriageable women? I turned to my colleague and asked if she has heard of this phenomenon, she responded deadpan "of course!" As I looked around my office I realized my

entire staff fell into this category. In a center where a master's degree is a hiring requirement, all the women were in their late twenties and unmarried. Sheung Nu, by definition. A leftover woman is any woman that is 27 or older and unmarried. These women usually have a high level of education and/or economic status (To, 2012). Before doing any further research on this very real phenomenon I asked the same colleague why she thought this was happening, she responded with words I have now heard many times, but that I will not soon forget "Well, A quality men, want to marry B quality women, B quality men want to marry C quality women and C quality man want to marry D quality women. So all that is left for A quality women are D quality men and no one wants to marry them." Gobsmailed, I had to remind myself that we were talking about people, not quality of beef and this was coming from a woman who is highly educated.

It reminded me that despite advancement of women in China, the patriarchal social structure was still alive and well. The shortage of women has led to the rebirth of the past social phenomenon of marriage as a marker of social stratification and status for men (Steffen, 2013). Census estimates project that by 2020, 20% of Chinese men will not be able to find a wife, and current belief is that this number will mostly be comprised of uneducated rural men, or 'D quality' men, as my colleague so eloquently put it (Steffen, 2013). This marriage squeeze has reinforced the traditional biases that women must marry up in 4 areas – height, age, educational level and income (Wiegel, 2013). This leaves educated women in an interesting predicament, as by the time they have finished their education, or reached a certain level of success in their career she could have priced herself out of the marriage market (Wiegel, 2013). On the other hand men also struggle with these patriarchal marriage requirements, as they

require them to be superior to their wives in income, wealth, and education (Steffon,2013)

Men may feel intimidated by successful women (a concept not unique to China) and/or find it hard to break cultural norms.

The interesting, though not surprising, part of this phenomenon is that this pressure to marry and marry properly is not only coming from family members but from everywhere. The feminist organization of the Communist Party has issued statements talking about the ills of women denying marriage in favour of focusing on their careers, with the education ministry further explaining that most leftover women do want to marry but have spent too much time perfecting themselves, thus rendering them undesirable in the marriage market (Wiegel, 2013).

Above this the propaganda against left-over women blames the phenomenon on feminist mentality, arrogance, being overly picky, and expecting male interest to stay constant with age (Wofford, n.d). One report on the Chinese news website, Xinhua, even went as far as saying that left-over women, as feminists, think of themselves too highly and therefore have some degree of psychological disorder (Xu, Z. ,n.d). What the Sheng Nu campaign is attempting to do is terrorize and shame educated, upwardly mobile women into sacrificing their own interest in order to preserve the stability of the patriarchal society (Wiegel, 2013). The Family Planning Bureau also has a vested interest in making sure these women procreate in order to ensure population quality, though they would also like to make sure that the right kind of people are having babies at the right time (Gaetano, 2009).

Dr. Sandy To, a scholar on left-over women, found that most single women do want to get married but they feel that they are rejected because of their accomplishments (2013), a

sentiment that is echoed by my colleagues. However, the government is blaming these women instead of looking into the difficulties that women are faced with. According to To, when faced with the challenges of finding a partner, women tend to fall into 4 different categories: the maximizer, the traditionalist, the satisficer, and the innovator (2013). The maximizer makes one of 3 choices: to date western men because they feel that they may be more open minded than their Chinese counterparts (this however does little to help the marriage squeeze and gender imbalance faced by the Chinese population), look for men that have very high economic status, or they can choose to conceal their accomplishments thus not intimidating men (To, 2013). The traditionalist has no concrete strategy for finding a partner and may rely on family and friends to help them find a suitable mate (an unlikely fate according to research) (To, 2013). The satisficer chooses to look for a mate with a lower economic status believing that their patriarchal demands will be lower as they will not be in the traditional role of bread winning (To,2013). Finally the innovator rejects men with strong patriarchal values who may interfere with their lifestyle and career choice, choosing to either stay single or seek non-traditional relationships that bring more personal satisfaction (To, 2013). Regardless of the choices made by these left-over women, the phenomenon persists, suggesting that different solutions are required.

Like the Maoist ideology of “holding up half the sky” as a strategy for women’s emancipation, or the One-Child Policy as a means of population control, there have been many different solutions and ideological strategies brought forward to balance gender ratios as well as improve the marriage squeeze. However, no one strategy has been effectively adapted.

There has been a call for the relaxation of the One-Child Policy since its inception. In the last few years this movement has gained a lot of momentum and it was recently announced by government officials that they will begin to loosen restrictions around family planning and allow millions of families to have two children (Wee, 2013). There is a belief that this relaxation, along with more promised amendments, will reduce SRB by allowing more families to have a son without sex selection (Wang, 2005). Though this is a step in the right direction and a small victory for human rights, it is far from eradicating the underlying ideology that has created a nation of missing girls. Beyond this, it is reported that the changes being made do not stem from the government's realization of the gendercide that has been occurring in its country for two decades, but because the policy is now seen as harmful to the economy, a huge priority in a global superpower.

Reports have surfaced that Chinese gangs are generating their own solutions to gender imbalance by trafficking in Vietnamese and North Korean women to China (Ebstein, 2013). These women can then be used for one of two purposes, to become wives to one of the millions of Chinese bachelors or be sold into sexual slavery in order to satisfy men in the "bachelor ghettos" that have been appearing in urban areas (Postons & Glover, 2004). Human trafficking of women for servitude is a "solution" to supply and demand problems (primarily to meet men's sexual needs) all over the world, one that I personally find deplorable and a practice that creates far more problems on every level than it could ever solve.

Another strategy that has been proposed is immigrating women of Chinese origin from other countries with large Chinese populations, thus enlarging the pool of marriageable women for

men in China (Postons & Glover, 2004). Though there is evidence of women migrating from rural to urban areas within China, this strategy is highly unlikely to generate much traction as these women may be of Chinese origin but they will be coming from countries with their own unique cultures which may not align with traditional patriarchal ideologies. Beyond this, most of the men that are currently unable to find partners are from rural areas in China where poverty is still rampant, and are unlikely to be able to afford the cost associated with bringing in a foreign wife (Postons & Glover, 2004).

A solution that has yet to generate traction would be to increase levels of homosexuality, perhaps due to scientific evidence on the biological origins of homosexuality as well as strong restriction of homosexual behaviour in Chinese society (Postons & Glover, 2004). Though it is unlikely that a heterosexual man unable to find a female partner would turn to another man, this strategy could have the positive impact of generating a larger approval of homosexuality allowing closeted homosexuals to live more openly (Postons & Glover, 2004). However, strictly looking at the problem of the marriage squeeze, this strategy (if you follow the biological belief that homosexuality is innate, which I do) could actually generate a large problem in finding a mate with which to produce children. With the opening up of views and restrictions on homosexuality, this would not only make it a viable option for men but also homosexual women who are also currently repressing their true selves.

As a therapist in China who occasionally practices from a solution focused therapy (SFT) framework I have asked my young clients the miracle question on many occasions. I will ask "If you woke up tomorrow and a miracle had occurred, what would your life look like? What would

be different and how would know that a miracle had occurred?” and then I wait patiently as they take the time to process both the question and the answer. It is a technique used in SFT to get the client to imagine what their future could look like without their presenting problem, it is meant to generate positive goals to bring the person closer to their “miracle”. I know, just like for my clients, there will be no miracle for China’s gender imbalance but I have asked myself these questions in hopes of generating some strategies that could facilitate change.

In my perfect world I would borrow from the unlikely strategy of immigrating women of Chinese origins from other countries. Having lived and prospered in China over the last five years as a young Canadian woman, I know that this can be an exciting country to live. I know that society is not ready for a takeover by foreign women, especially those of us who are not of Chinese descent, however if it was made enticing for young women to return to their motherland, they might find, as I have, that new China is a good place to build a life. Currently, if people immigrating into China want to become Chinese citizens, they must surrender the passport of their country of origin. A relaxation of this rule, allowing people to hold dual-citizenship, would go some way towards incentivizing immigration into China for young women of Chinese descent. This could potential help the marriage squeeze and increase the lower fertility rates. However, as I write this as a possible ending I know that this is too far a leap for China, that it enjoys its homogeneous nature and would not want the instability that could come from citizens holding permanent passes to the outside world. This, indeed, would be a miraculous turn of events.

A further possible solution lies in education. Much of the focus since the Maoist reforms of the mid-twentieth century has been on educating and empowering women, but little emphasis has been placed on educating men in order to reduce the patriarchal stereotypes that persist in society. As the new urban daughters of the One-Child Policy have demonstrated, gender roles and ideologies have very little basis in biology: they are a social and cultural construction, malleable to society's perceptions and needs. By ensuring education for all men, not just the 'A quality' stock, the process of reconstructing the language and perceptions surrounding the need to continue the patriarchal structure inherent in society can begin. Due to the innate engenderment of all aspects of Chinese society, I am aware that my miracle strategies may be no more attainable than any others previously proposed. However, every change, regardless of magnitude, must begin somewhere. I truly believe that educating men is the place where China should start.

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