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## China's Infanticide Epidemic

### Abstract

China's one-child policy, initiated to curtail China's rapid population growth, has resulted in fundamental human rights abuses. Due to the cultural stigma of having female children, the stringent policy has led to millions of female infants being aborted, abandoned, or killed. As China struggles with population control, families are faced with the necessity of bearing male children, who are perceived as being more valuable to the family and who are often charged with the care of their elderly parents. Consequently, the elimination of female infants has created a skewed sex ratio in China's population—the social, economic, and physical repercussions of which are yet to be fully realized. Female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, drowning, and the withholding of health care and nutrition are only a few consequences of the restrictive one-child policy.

### Keywords

Human rights, China, One-child policy, Infanticide

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## China's Infanticide Epidemic

By Winter Wall

China's one-child policy, initiated to curtail China's rapid population growth, has resulted in fundamental human rights abuses. Due to the cultural stigma of having female children, the stringent policy has led to millions of female infants being aborted, abandoned, or killed. As China struggles with population control, families are faced with the necessity of bearing male children, who are perceived as being more valuable to the family and who are often charged with the care of their elderly parents. Consequently, the elimination of female infants has created a skewed sex ratio in China's population—the social, economic, and physical repercussions of which are yet to be fully realized. Female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, drowning, and the withholding of health care and nutrition are only a few consequences of the restrictive one-child policy.

### Ramifications

The historical preference of sons that drives many families to exterminate their daughters remains an integral dimension of Chinese society. Many believe that a preference to bear a son will diminish with the influx of urbanization and education; however, that myth has been debunked by the prevalence of female infanticide in its many forms. The majority of the modern Chinese population identifies with cultural norms, fierce state loyalty, stigmas, and social constructions of gender that condone female infanticide. The intricate interface of women's fertility and family status has led many Chinese to take severe measures to manipulate their offspring.

It is believed that nearly half of all Chinese women of reproductive age (or their husbands) have been sterilized as a result of the government's insistence on family planning. The Chinese government has encouraged sterilization, intra-uterine device (IUD) insertions, and abortions in countrywide campaigns that started in 1973. Despite the laws against sex-selective abortion in China, abortions are still widely executed with impunity.

The government has denied the prevalence of female infanticide as a direct result of the birth planning policy. It has been declared that such practices are only found in the most "backward" regions of the countryside that still subscribe to a feudalistic mentality. However, statistics indicate that this problematic pattern spans across the country, resulting in an entirely skewed sex ratio. The sex ratio at birth is defined as the number of male live births per 100 female births. There are several environmental and demographic factors that can possibly skew a country's sex ratio at birth, such as disease outbreaks and wars. In the last several decades, China's sex ratio at birth has steadily increased from 106:100 in 1979 to 111:100 in 1990 and to 117:100 in 2001, with an increase as high as 130:100 reported in some rural areas. In contrast, population sex ratio refers to the number of males in a population per 100 females in that population. The population sex ratio in the United States, according to the 2001 census, is 96.8:100. Conversely, China's population sex ratio is conservatively estimated at 104:100. These figures illustrate a stark picture for China's future and the lives of its girls.

Due to the troubling implications revealed by these statistics, the future of China's population is gravely concerning. Sex-selective abortion and various methods of female infanticide have resulted in an excess of males in China's population. It is estimated that, over the next twenty years, there will be twelve to fifteen percent more males than females in the Chinese population. There is concern about the subsequent inability of these males to marry, especially in a society where marriage denotes social status and acceptance. The problem of excess males has also been linked to a marginalization of these men in Chinese society, as the majority of them come from the lowest socioeconomic

classes. In China, ninety-four percent of all unmarried people age twenty-eight to forty-nine are male, and ninety-seven percent of those have not completed high school. Therefore, there will be a growing number of young men marginalized because of their lack of family prospects. With many males unable to marry, concerns rise over a potential increase in anti-social and/or violent behavior threatening the stability and security of China. There is also speculation over the potential increase in the sex industry, due to the unmet sexual needs of unmarried men, possibly leading to an increase in sexual coercion and trafficking.

### **Conclusion**

Among all of China's governmental policies, the one-child policy has been called the "most momentous and far-reaching in its implications for China's population and economic development." Chinese women's reproduction is utilized as a feature of socialist modernization, a sacrifice for the good of the state. Reproductive rights in Chinese society have been co-opted by the government as a component of a broader push towards socialist modernization. The denial of these fundamental rights is seen by the government as a necessary societal sacrifice for the preservation of the state. This powerful state loyalty creates a ripe environment for a pervasive fertility policy, regardless of the ramifications. Only in hindsight are the consequences revealing themselves as highly problematic.

In hopes of defining an alternative solution to the current manifestations of the one-child policy, there is a movement towards "cooperative" fertility reduction. Encouraging the advancement of women and exploring the de-incentivizing of son preference, rather than forbidding female infanticide, will mitigate the emergence of a black market for women's trafficking. Instigating "cooperative" methods of fertility reduction, including advancement of women through education and increased access to employment, could greatly improve the livelihood of China's girls. Instead, the Chinese government insists on the use of coercive methods to enforce the strict regulations imposed by the one-child policy. Although this policy has led to severe consequences, there are encouraging shifts in behavior beginning to occur. In a recent Chinese national survey, thirty-seven percent of young women, predominately urban, said they had no gender preference and forty-five percent reported their ideal family would consist of one boy and one girl. While the shift will occur slowly, indications show that, through a combination of cooperative fertility reduction and evolving cultural priorities, the effects of the one-child policy will not persist as predominately in the coming generations.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

2003. "China Amends One-Child Policy." *Reproductive Health Matters* 11 (21): 194.

Annotation: This article examines the dynamics that have forced a shift in China's one-child policy. The author explains the shortfalls of China's initial policy, including the loopholes that allowed many parents to bear more than one child, and the exceptions given to parents whose first-born children were female. The article also describes the problems China faces as its population ages.

Coale, A. J., and J. Banister. 1994. "Five Decades of Missing Females in China." *Demography* 31 (3): 459-479.

Annotation: "Five Decades of Missing Females in China" is an in-depth report written by Senior Research Demographer of Princeton University, Ansley J. Coale, and Center for International Research Chief, Judith Banister. This report takes a historical approach, tracking the lack of female births from the 1930s to the present. Utilizing data collected from the census and fertility surveys, the authors explain that many girls are never reported because they die so young. The charts and graphs included in the report clearly illustrate the data regarding sex ratios in China.

Fong, Vanessa L. 2002. "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters." *American Anthropologist* 104 (4): 1098-1109.

Annotation: This report is written within an anthropological framework, and suggests that Chinese urban daughters are enjoying more freedom than ever before due to the lack of competition from brothers. Fong points out that, in many urban areas, daughters have been successful financially and thus are able to care for their aging parents. She does allude to the fact that this premise is specific to large urban metropolises, and that the rural populations of China rarely see daughters in a positive light. This report is a reader-friendly study exploring the often overlooked positive effects of China's one-child policy.

Fong, Vanessa L. 2004. Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One Child Policy. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Annotation: In this book, Vanessa L. Fong utilizes case studies, interviews, and in-depth research to highlight the pressures the one-child policy places on Chinese youth. Fong explores the implications of China's strict policy for future generations. Filial duty, modernization, stratification, and the aging population are all investigated with respect to the policy. Fong uses her expertise well in this complex look at a nuanced subject matter.

Goodkind, Daniel M. 2004. "China's Missing Children: The 2000 Census Underreporting Surprise." *Population Studies* 58 (3): 281-295.

Annotation: This report is technical and based on demographic data collected from the 1990 and the 2000 Chinese census. The data show that nearly thirty-seven million children were missing in the 2000 census. The discrepancy is attributed to policy changes that held officials at all levels personally responsible for upholding birth quotas. The report is succinct and provides a wealth of information regarding the phenomenon of China's missing children.

Greenhalgh, S., and J. Bongaarts. 1987. "Fertility Policy in China: Future Options." *Science* 235 (4793): 1167-1172.

Annotation: The authors utilize statistical analysis to explore alternatives to China's one-child policy. They project the intended possibilities of one and two child models, as well as models such as "stop at two and delay and space." The authors indicate the possible economic,

social, and psychological benefits of these proposed alternatives. This article is detailed and investigates many facets of the policy and how alternatives may aid in China's future success.

Gupta, M. D. 2005. "Explaining Asia's Missing Women: A New Look at the Data." *Population & Development Review* 31 (3): 529-535.

Annotation: Monica Das Gupta explores new data in "Explaining Asia's Missing Women." She examines the financial value placed on males as an explanation of the widespread son preference. As sons are seen to preserve precious resources, especially in rural areas, girls are largely viewed as expendable. Through sex-selective abortions, withholding of infant care, and other means, millions of Chinese girls do not appear on record. While the report is well-written and interesting, the new data does not seem to be as enlightening as the title suggests. This report utilizes demographic data to compare and contrast countries with uneven sex ratios.

Hesketh, T., and Z. W. Xing 2006. "Abnormal Sex Ratios in Human Populations: Causes and Consequences." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 103 (36): 13271-13275.

Annotation: In conjunction with the Institute of Child Health, University College of London, and the Department of Public Health at Zhejiang Normal University, the authors of this report explore the consequences of abnormal sex ratios. The authors cite the overwhelming excess of males in the Chinese population, their subsequent inability to marry, and what that means as far as marginalization in Chinese society. The authors of this report present the data clearly and use thorough analysis to clarify the findings.

Hesketh, T., L. Lu, et al. 2005. "The Effect of China's One-Child Family Policy after 25 Years." *New England Journal of Medicine* 353 (11): 1171-1176.

Annotation: In "The Effect of China's One-Child Family Policy after 25 Years," the authors address the time period leading to the one-child policy, its effect on the population, and its future implications. The report is broken into several accessible sections accompanied by helpful charts and graphs. The authors illustrate how the vigilance exhibited by the Chinese government has significantly impacted the country's population growth and sex ratio.

Hong, L. K. 1987. "Potential Effects of the One-Child Policy on Gender Equality in the People's Republic of China." *Gender and Society* 1 (3): 317-326.

Annotation: Lawrence Hong explores latent ramifications of China's one-child policy in this report published in the journal, *Gender and Society*. He acknowledges and gives credit to the often-explored consequences of insecurity for the elderly as well as female infanticide, but

dives further to identify other ramifications. Included in the author's hypothesis are effects relating to the decomposition of patrilineal lineage importance, the increase in popularity of uxorilocal marriage, as well as the influx of nontraditional career options for Chinese women. While the author recognizes immediate problems associated with the one-child policy, he predicts it may breed greater gender equality. Written clearly and succinctly, this piece proves both provocative and informative.

Hull, Terence H. 1990. "Recent Trends in Sex Ratios at Birth in China." *Population and Development Review* 16 (1): 63-83.

Annotation: The disturbingly high sex ratio at birth in China is explored in this report. The author explains three main causes, including infanticide, abortion, and inaccurate statistical reporting. Chinese women, the author argues, are suffering as a result of these practices. The phenomenon of missing girls has grave consequences, including a growing number of undereducated, undernourished, and unrepresented girls throughout the country. Utilizing data and graphs, the author illustrates these trends, making this report accessible to anyone interested in understanding China's high sex ratio at birth.

Jeffery, R., and P. Jeffery 1983. "Female Infanticide and Amniocentesis." *Economic and Political Weekly* 18 (16/17): 654-656.

Annotation: This article explores the history of female infanticide and the instigation of amniocentesis. The authors explore the consequences of new technologies accompanying the development of China. While a little dated, this article illustrates the importance of understanding why and how amniocentesis originated. This article is filled with data and heavy on statistics. It is aimed at statisticians or scholars looking for in-depth data.

Johansson, S., and O. Nygren 1991. "The Missing Girls of China: A New Demographic Account." *Population and Development Review* 17 (1): 35-51.

Annotation: Sten Johansson and Ola Nygren, in accordance with the Population and Development Review, explore the missing girls of China in this well-researched report. The political and ethical ramifications of China's one-child policy are explored throughout. The authors posit that international curiosity has driven scientists, advocates, and academics to discover what is happening to the hundreds of thousands of missing girls. Adoption, unreported births, and infanticide are all identified in this report.

Junhong, C. 2001. "Prenatal Sex Determination and Sex-Selective Abortion in Rural Central China." *Population and Development Review* 27 (2): 259-281.

Annotation: The author explains the three main factors of China's uneven sex ratio in this report. These factors are: under-reporting female births; excess female infant mortality; and an increase in prenatal sex determination and sex-selective abortion. The determinants and

prevalence of sex-selective abortions are explored. The author explores the impact of son preference on female health care and food allocation. Calling upon several Chinese scholars and survey analyses, this article is accessible and logical.

Lofstedt, P., L. Shusheng, et al. 2004. "Abortion Patterns and Reported Sex Ratios at Birth in Rural Yunnan, China." *Reproductive Health Matters* 12 (24): 86-95.

Annotation: This well-researched article, the result of collaboration between researchers and lecturers in Sweden and China, details the rise of sex ratios at birth due to selective abortion and other termination options. The once-believed myth that son preference would diminish with education and modernization is debunked by the research compiled for this report. This piece is technically written and statistically informed. The research to support this study was conducted thoroughly, and the article is intended for those who have a firm grasp of statistical analysis.

Madigan-Curtis, A. 2005. "A Decade After 'The Dying Room': Revisiting China's One-Child Policy." *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 8 (1): 53-54.

Annotation: Aidan Madigan-Curtis is co-president of Harvard China Care, a chapter of the China Care Foundation, and a US-based advocacy and support group for orphaned, abandoned, and special needs children in China. This article deals with China's one-child policy in reference to a BBC documentary entitled "The Dying Room." It explores the human rights abuses perpetuated by the policy. While this article is reader friendly, it is not as in depth as some might appreciate.

Merli, M. Giovanna, and Herbert L. Smith. 2002. "Has the Chinese Family Planning Policy Been Successful in Changing Fertility Preferences?" *Demography* 39 (3): 557-572.

Annotation: In this article, the authors research the fertility rates of women in four counties of northern China and compare them to the desired birth rate of the women. The fertility preferences align with the strictness of the one-child policy. The authors' comprehensive research illustrates the socially constructed aspect of desirable family size. The report is useful for those looking for data collection specific to women's fertility preferences in relation to family planning practice.

Rajan, S. Irudaya. 1994. "China's One-Child Policy: Implication for Population Aging." *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (38): 2502-2506.

Annotation: While this article is a bit dated, the author provides excellent data and demographic information interpreting impending complications of the one-child policy. The author cites that nearly one hundred percent of urban Chinese women had experienced an



abortion in order to comply with the strict standards. The author explores the societal, economic, and political ramifications of single-child families. The article presents the information in a straightforward manner, clarified by charts and graphs.

Scharping, T. 2005. *Birth Control in China, 1949-2000: Population Policy and Demographic Development*. London; New York: Routledge.

Annotation: Written from a demographic perspective, Dr. Thomas Scharping illustrates many of the population problems in China. Utilizing broad field-based research from over twenty years, Scharping discusses the vast consequences of the one-child policy on China's population. The author's analysis is extensive. This work is of particular interest to scholars interested in the social and political impacts the policy has had on the modern Chinese population, as well as the implications of government participation in fertility management.

Sen, A. 1997. "Population Policy: Authoritarianism versus Cooperation." *Journal of Population Economics* 10 (1): 3-22.

Annotation: In "Population Policy: Authoritarianism versus Cooperation," economist Amartya Sen explores the nexus of coercion and cooperation in population and family planning policy. Sen contrasts family planning policy cases in India and China to examine the possibility of alternative family planning methods. Advancement of women in the form of education and increased access to employment are submitted as alternative, "cooperative" methods of reducing fertility rates. Sen employs economic jargon that makes this report dense; however, his findings are insightful.

Shalev, C. 2001. "China to CEDAW: An Update on Population Policy." *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (1): 119-147.

Annotation: Shalev takes a humanitarian perspective in "China to CEDAW: An Update on Population Policy." The author explores the results of a presentation of China's periodic reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The concerns of CEDAW are expressly stated as the onechild policy's human rights abuses are exposed.

Shen, J. 1998. "China's Future Population and Development Challenges." *The Geographical Journal* 164 (1): 32-40.

Annotation: Shen uses examples of China's population growth and rapid urbanization to examine the prospects for future development.. To illustrate his point, the author discusses three challenges he deems critical to China's future.. The three prominent themes in this report are the challenges in the agriculture-food sector, the employment sector, and the

urbanization sector. Using demographic models, this report provides useful analysis on China's development challenges and opportunities.

Short, S. E., M. Linmao, et al. 2000. "Birth Planning and Sterilization in China." *Population Studies* 54 (3): 279-291.

Annotation: The authors of "Birth Planning and Sterilization" articulate the prevalence of sterilization as a method of family planning in China. It is cited that nearly half of all women of reproductive age (or their husbands) are sterilized, and the authors articulate the potential consequences of such an invasive policy. The authors explain the Chinese government's insistence on family planning and promotion of sterilization. This report is of interest to anyone wanting to learn more about China's family planning methodology.

Short, S. E., and Z. Fengying 1998. "Looking Locally at China's One-Child Policy." *Studies in Family Planning* 29 (4): 373-387.

Annotation: Little information has been formally collected on the impact of China's one-child policy in China's rural areas. The authors of "Looking Locally at China's One-Child Policy" utilize data collected from the China Health and Nutrition Survey. The surveys were amassed from 167 communities in eight provinces. The authors research the policy as well as the incentives used to enforce this initiative. This report is useful for those looking for elusive rural data in reference to the adherence to the one-child policy.

Spinelli, M. G. 2005. "Infanticide: Contrasting Views." *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 8 (1): 15-24.

Annotation: "Infanticide: Contrasting Views" is a report that explores the history, causes, and implications of infanticide worldwide. The author identifies differing cultural norms, stigmas, and social constructions of gender roles to explicate the use of infanticide. Written from a mental health perspective, this report also emphasizes the need to understand the origin of infanticide in order to begin to eliminate it. The author's findings are useful for those exploring the psychosocial ramifications of strict fertility control.

Wang, Feng. 2005. "Can China Afford to Continue Its One-Child Policy?" *Asia-Pacific Issues* No. 77.

Annotation: The author of "Can China Afford to Continue its One-Child Policy?" explores the economic consequences of the stringent policy. The author questions the impact of the policy on all facets of Chinese society. The high sex ratio, aging population, and the increasing instance of marriage for status have impacted Chinese society indelibly. This report is comprehensive, logical, and helpful for those interested in the immediate and latent economic problems associated with the one-child policy.

White, T. 2006. *China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning in the People's Republic, 1949-2005*. United States: Cornell University Press.

Annotation: This well-researched book details the modern history of fertility planning in China. The author declares that the one-child policy has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. The critical role of China's political history, including the Maoist, Dengist, and post-Deng eras are examined as a framework for understanding the sources of this policy.. This book is valuable for those who desire a well-rounded historical exploration of the one-child policy.

Wong, Y. L. R. 1997. "Dispersing the 'Public' and the 'Private': Gender and the State in the Birth Planning Policy of China." *Gender and Society* 11 (4): 509-525.

Annotation: This article explores the discrepancies between Western capitalistic ideals and the socialist sphere of China. The author illustrates the power of the state in the personal lives of Chinese citizens. Infused with political theory, this report raises many questions about loyalty, policy, and sacrifice. While not statistically dense, this report is useful for those looking to explore the ideological motivations of state-enforced birth planning.

Yi, Z., T. Ping, et al. 1993. "Causes and Implications of the Recent Increase in the Reported Sex Ratio at Birth in China." *Population and Development Review* 19 (2): 283-302.

Annotation: The authors use reverse survival method to interpret data from the 1990 census, the 1987 One Percent Population Survey, and the 1988 Two-per-Thousand Fertility and Contraception Survey to illustrate the dramatic discrepancy in sex-differential. This finding, the authors explain, shows that under-reporting of female births is the main cause of the high sex ratio at birth. The report also indicates the importance of new technologies, including sex-selective abortion, in understanding the skewed sex at birth ratio. The authors question the rampant reporting of female infanticide. This report presents unique findings that contradict many mainstream beliefs about female infanticide in China.

Zilberberg, J. 2007. "Sex Selection and Restricting Abortion and Sex Determination." *Bioethics* 21 (9): 517-519.

Annotation: Writing from a bioethics perspective, Zilberberg examines the empowerment of women as a solution to infanticide rather than the elimination of sex-selective abortion. Eliminating sex-selective abortion, she argues, will encourage underground market practice. Encouraging the advancement of women and exploring the de-incentivizing of son preference, in the opinion of the author, would reduce the rate of excess infant mortality. The author's academic style makes this report of particular interest to scholars already familiar with the subject matter.